

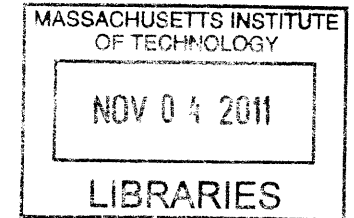
# Urban Agriculture As a Tool for Neighborhood Fabric Repair in Post-Industrial Detroit

by

Sandra Trubow Fairbank

A.B. French Literature  
Washington University, 1970

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**ARCHIVES**

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING IN PARTIAL  
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# Urban Agriculture As a Tool for Neighborhood Fabric Repair in Post-Industrial Detroit

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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning  
on June 1, 2011 in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master in Science in  
Urban Studies and Planning

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis focuses on Detroit as a post-industrial city that suffers from abandonment, vacancy, and food security issues. I address this problem through the lens of agriculture, asking how urban farming can be used to repair the urban fabric and increase access to food in two Detroit neighborhoods. To this end, I suggest a variety of urban agriculture uses that can be integrated into the life and form of the neighborhoods. I began my work with an investigation of shrinking cities precedents in Leipzig and Youngstown, and urban agriculture precedents in Milwaukee, Havana, and Boston. I arrive at a set of policy and design interventions to encourage and support neighborhood repair and health. Although urban agriculture alone is not adequate to heal the life of Detroit's neighborhoods, this thesis sees the value of these interventions and illuminates the possibilities of a rebuilt Detroit where rural life and urban agriculture play key roles.

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Brent D. Ryan  
Title: Assistant Professor of Urban Design and Public Policy

## **Acknowledgements**

Thesis work is more than just a long paper. It a process of research, preparation, collaboration, criticism and support, The thesis student can't do this project alone. She needs the help of her teachers, her interviewees, her institution, her friends, and her family.

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Susan Birndorf welcomed me to Detroit on four different occasions. Eric Gaabo, of Woodbridge, answered my numerous questions in person, by phone, and by e-mail. Kathryn Underwood patiently explained the complexities of Detroit City government. Jess Daniel showed me the enthusiasm of a new generation of Detroiters.

Marilyn Levine at the M.I.T. Writing and Communication Center reviewed several drafts and guided me in adding structure and refinements. Her interest and attention to this project was a great help. Abigail Trafford cheerfully and skillfully helped me shape and edit my first draft into readable form. Duncan Kincaid of M.I.T. CRON and M.I.T. Librarians Jolene Marie de Verges and Peter Cohn answered questions small, large, and constant.

Toby Fairbank was supportive throughout my M.I.T. year and as thesis reader and editor helped me to add structure, clarity and accuracy.

## **Notes**

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs and maps are by Sandra Fairbank.

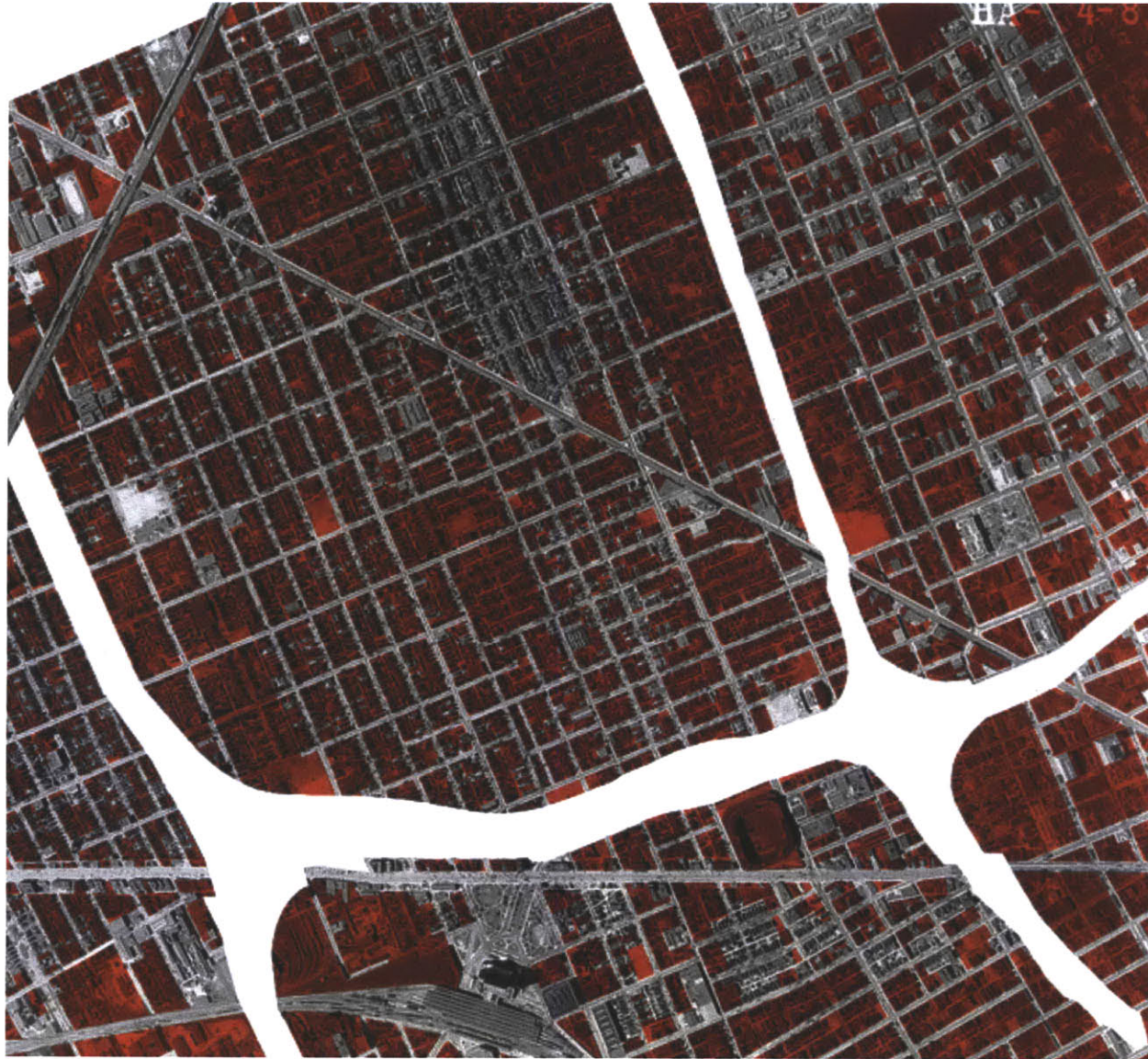


Photo collage of Woodbridge, Core City, North Corktown and Corktown. Courtesy of Patrick Stowe Jones.



On this block seven houses  
are still here to be counted.  
and if you count the shacks housing illegal chickens,  
the pens for dogs, the tiny  
pig sty, that is half cave....  
and if you count them you can  
count the crows' nest  
in the high beech tree  
at the corner, and you can  
regard the beech tree itself  
bronzing in the mid-morning light  
as the mast of the great ship  
sailing us all back  
into the 16<sup>th</sup> century  
or into the present age's  
final discovery.

Phillip Levine, 2010

## Preface

*Restaurant design has been the focus of my thirty-year architectural career. Over the years I have valued my work with owner/chefs, especially those who collaborate with farmers. As a result I have developed a keen interest in small scale sustainable agriculture and in urban farming. I see this thesis investigation as an extension of and variation on my previous work at the intersection of food and design.*

*Working in Boston years later I applied my interest in food beyond the design of restaurants to design as a tool to integrate urban agriculture\* practices into the curriculum and cafeteria of the Mission Hill School in Roxbury. This volunteer experience involved growing fruits and vegetables in a schoolyard garden, bringing produce from Massachusetts farms into the school kitchen, and redesigning the cafeteria, so that fresh soups and salads could be served.*

\* I use a definition of urban agriculture as “ the growing, processing, and distributing of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities” (Community Food Service Coalition. 2000.[www.foodsecurity.org/](http://www.foodsecurity.org/)). Within this context I see urban agriculture as a continuum, ranging from backyard gardens to large scale for-profit farms, from vegetable farms to tree farms, and from the preparation of soil to the distribution of fruits and vegetables.

*For over a decade I lived in the city of Detroit. In 1964, when I left Detroit, at the age of seventeen, I had no awareness of agriculture in cities generally nor in Detroit specifically. I had grown up in a white neighborhood, close to Detroit's northern boundary from 1952 to 1965, and knew about the city's great racial divides. I was also aware that the city had a very large population (at 1,670,144 in 1960, it was the fifth biggest city in the country), and was quite sprawling, like Los Angeles.*

*In 2009, returning to Detroit after twenty-five years, I began to understand Detroit's great lack of density, and its rapidly declining population. It had become the most significantly "shrinking city" in the U.S. In my thesis proposal to M.I.T., I described a Detroit with viable neighborhoods, connected by a network of urban farms, a twenty-first century "emerald necklace" for a post-industrial city. Once I began my thesis research, I began to see articles everywhere about Detroit's rampant vacancies and about urban agriculture as a solution to problems of vacancy. I wondered, naively in retrospect, whether Detroit would have answers to its questions before I could finish my thesis.*

*After my first trip to look at Detroit through this urban farming lens, four things about the city became clear and a specific question emerged. First, beyond the vacantness was the stillness and beauty of the land. I'd had no sense of how quickly a city can take on rural qualities, once the buildings and their inhabitants are gone. Second, in many ways, Detroit is a hyperscaled city. All automobile-based infrastructure shares that extreme scale; the pedestrian scale is mostly minimized and often ignored. Third, as a figure-ground drawing, it had very little figure, and a great deal of ground. And finally, although numerous, Detroit's numerous existing urban agriculture projects seemed inconsequential compared to the vastness of the city. Could urban agriculture make a difference in the fabric and health of Detroit ?*

## Introduction

Today Detroit is a vast city with over a third of its land vacant. Manhattan, San Francisco, and Boston would fit into Detroit's footprint. Detroit has an area of 139 square miles and a population of 713,777. According to the 2010 U.S. census the combined area of Manhattan, San Francisco and Boston is 118 square miles and their combined population is 3,008,072 (Gallagher, 2009) (2010 census.gov). Their footprint is 16% smaller than the footprint of Detroit and their population is over 400% greater. Because so much of its land is vacant, Detroit can feel abandoned and lifeless. Detroit is a shrinking city whose population has dropped from 1,850,000 at its peak in 1960 to less than half of that in 2010. It has problems of job loss and depopulation like Buffalo, Cleveland, or Youngstown, but to a much greater degree. Its problems are exacerbated by its lack of density: a 70,000 square foot block in West Cambridge MA has sixteen houses. An 80,000 square foot block in Corktown has only eight houses.

Detroit is also a food desert where residents have minimal access to fresh, healthy food but easy access to fast food and junk food. Many of its citizens lack accessibility to transportation, neither owning cars, nor having access to viable public transit. Detroit also has many healthy neighborhoods, but the edges and spaces between them are vacant and vast. Journalist Mark Dowie, writing in *Guernica*, suggested urban farming as an appropriate response to Detroit's vacancy problems:

“Were I an aspiring farmer in search of fertile land to buy and plow, I would seriously consider moving to Detroit. There is open land, fertile soil, ample water, willing labor, and a desperate demand for decent food. And there is plenty of community will behind the idea of turning the capital of American industry into an agrarian paradise. In fact, of all the cities in the world, Detroit may be best positioned to become the world’s first one hundred percent food self-sufficient city” (Dowie 2009).

Dowie makes a bold statement. I propose applying this idea to Woodbridge and Corktown, two Detroit neighborhoods to ask:

**How can urban agriculture be used to repair the urban fabric of two neighborhoods and make a connection between them ? How can a variety of agricultural uses be integrated into the life and form of these neighborhoods as a response to their abandonment and in an effort to rebuild their physical edges ? What policies does the City of Detroit need to institute to support these changes ?**

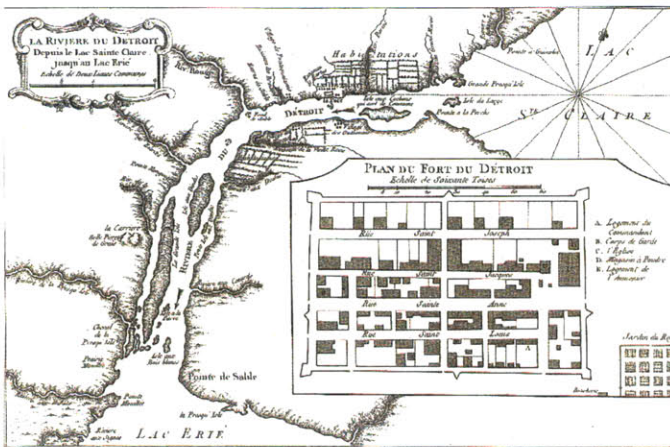
To answer these questions Chapter One provides a brief history of Detroit as a framework for understanding the development of Detroit over the past three hundred years. Chapter Two reviews two shrinking cities, Leipzig and Youngstown, examining how their government developed strategies in response to their depopulation. Chapter Three describes urban agriculture in Havana and at two non-profit farms, Growing Power and The Food Project, comparing their approaches to growing food and building community with current efforts in Detroit. Chapter Four, which introduces and describes two case study neighborhoods, Woodbridge and Corktown, profiles residents involved in urban agriculture and community development and describes the state of local urban agriculture efforts to date. Chapter Five



suggests urban agricultural interventions in response to the issue of vacancy in both neighborhoods, and makes conclusions about urban agriculture and its role in Detroit's future. The thesis concludes that urban agriculture, while important, is just one strategy in the rebuilding of Detroit's neighborhoods, city, and region. Urban agriculture should not be used as a nostalgic recreation of the rural past, but as part of a post-industrial landscape, where rural life and urban life coexist and collaborate to create a new Detroit.



Western Woodbridge. Source: Google Street View, 2010



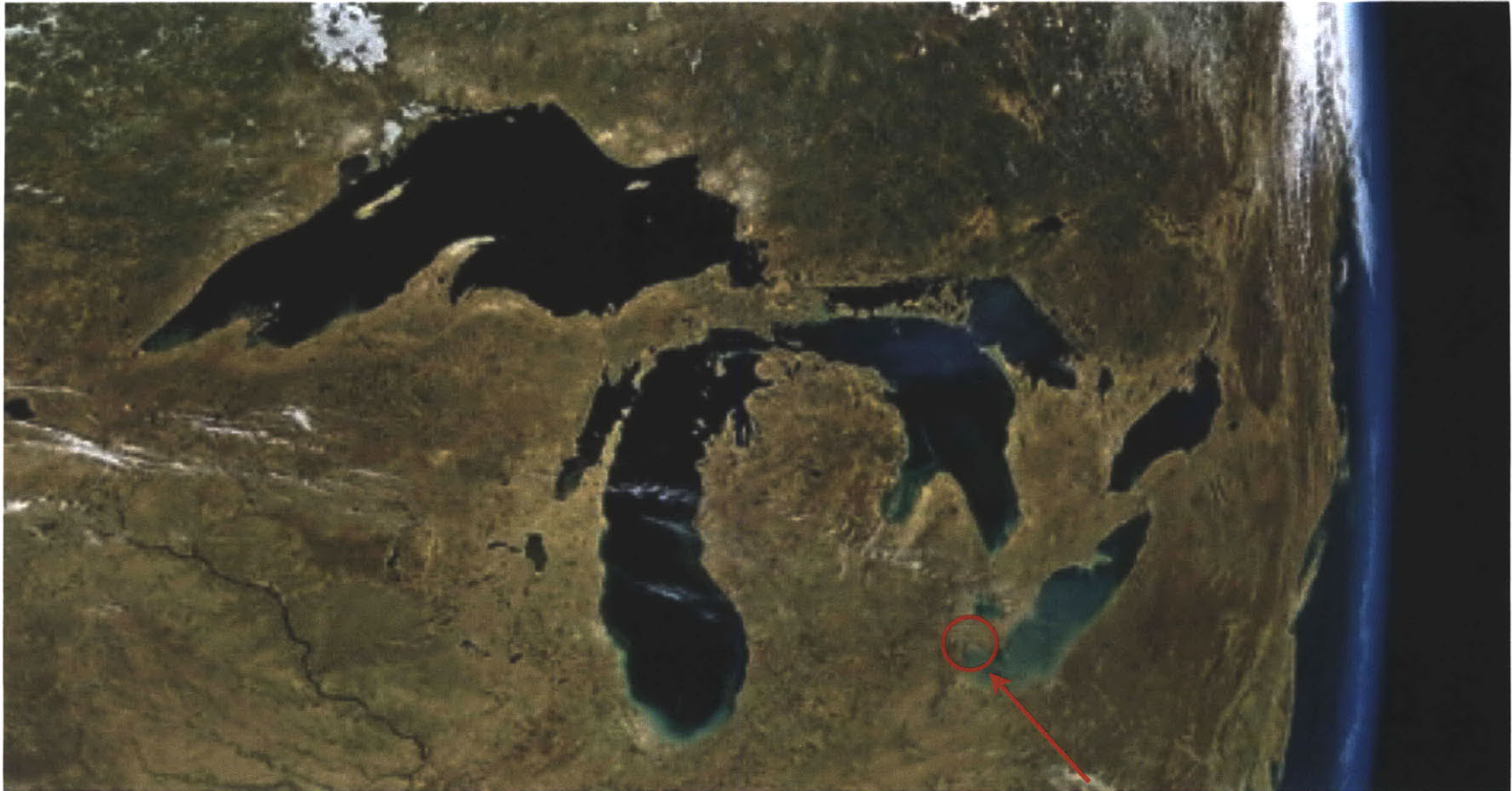
Detroit Bellin Map of 1764. Source: Yale University Library

## Chapter One

### A Brief History of Detroit

Water, in the form of the Great Lakes and the Detroit River, is key to the development of Detroit, throughout its history and at a number of scales. Both Michigan's native peoples and French explorers coming through Canada travelled the same waterways. For both, transportation on water was quicker and more effective than transportation over land. The river and lake connection eventually gave the French a water route from Quebec to Chicago and then to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico ([www.historydetroit.com](http://www.historydetroit.com)).

In 1701 the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac built Fort Pontchartrain at a controllable, narrow point on the fertile banks above the Detroit River ("étroit" is the French word for narrow), that connects Lake Erie north through Lake St. Clair to Lakes Huron, Superior, and Michigan. The Fort was a gridded village within walls, on the site of Detroit's present downtown. The relationship of



Detroit Metropolitan Area

Low earth orbit view of the Great Lakes (Michigan, Superior, Huron, Erie, and Ontario) seen from the International Space Station. Source: NASA Visible Earth, 2008

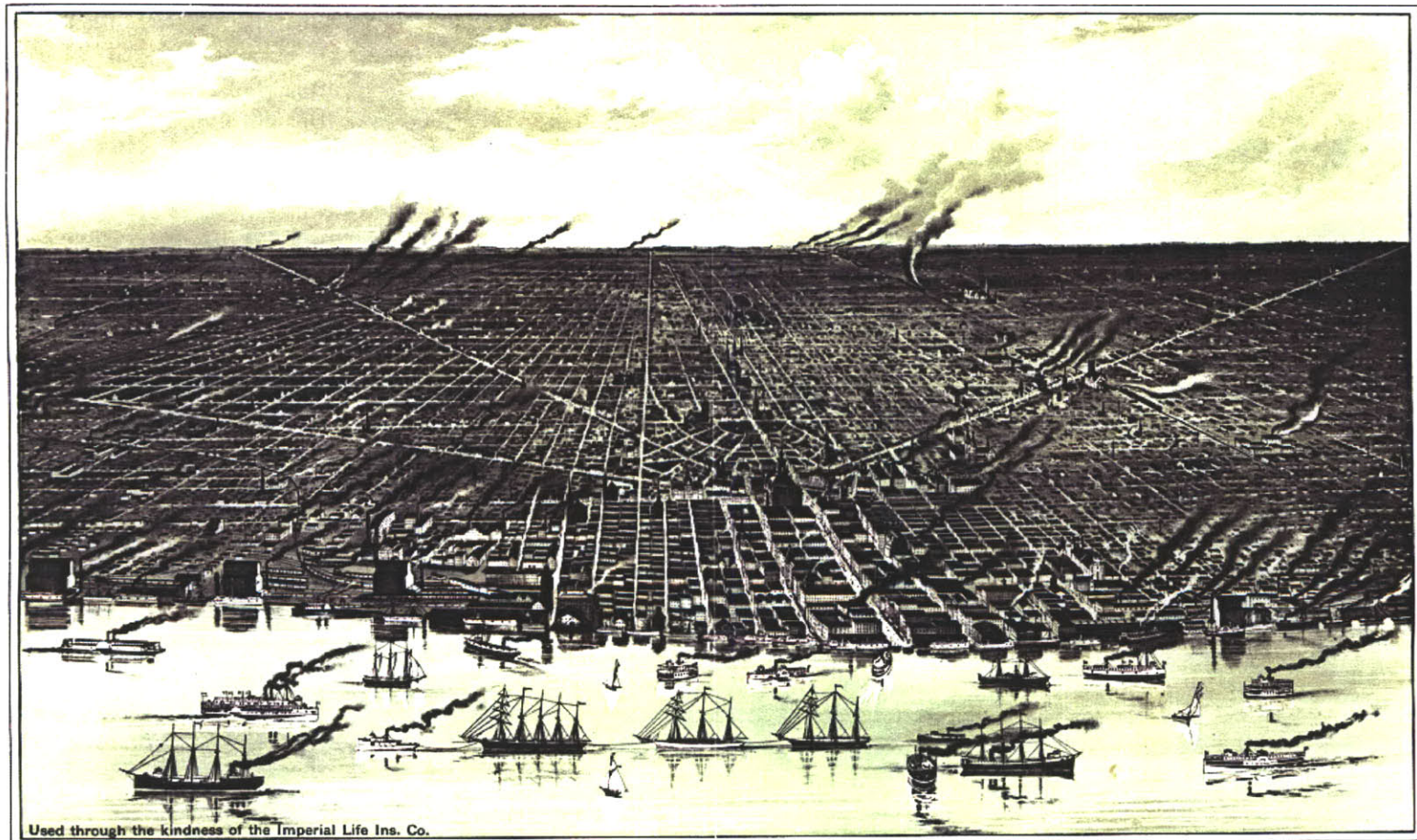


those early settlements to the Detroit River can still be seen today in Detroit's street grid. During the eighteenth century Detroit developed as a French farming community with long narrow ribbon farms or "arpents" extending north from the river. When the farms were first subdivided later in the eighteenth century, streets developed along the farm lines north-south and east-west (parallel to the river) (Farmer 1884, 17). After the fire of 1805, which destroyed most of downtown Detroit, Judge Augustus Woodward, inspired by the L'Enfant radial plans of Paris and Washington D.C., designed a radial plan for Detroit, which was overlaid on the earlier French plan.



First Ford Plant, Piquette Street, 2011.

Located at a junction of both rail and water transportation networks, on the route from the farms of the Midwest to the tables of the Northeast, Detroit's population grew from 21,000 to 206,000 in the second half of the nineteenth century (Glaesser 2010, 45-46). In the beginning of the twentieth century, the first American automobile manufacturing plant was built by the Ford Motor Company on Piquette Street, about two miles from Woodbridge. Detroit and the region became a center for the manufacture of

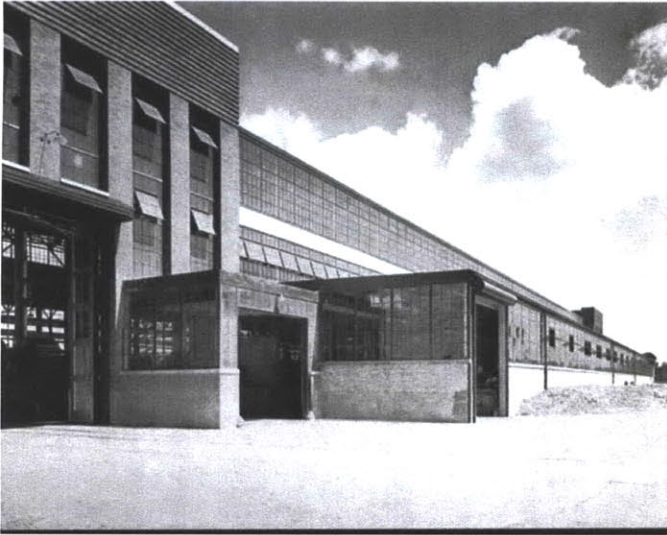


Used through the kindness of the Imperial Life Ins. Co.

BIRDS EYE VIEW -- SHOWING ABOUT THREE MILES SQUARE -- OF THE CENTRAL PORTION OF THE CITY OF DETROIT, MICHIGAN.

1899 Panoramic View of Detroit showing the radials of the 1807 Woodward plan and factories throughout the city.  
Source: Imperial Life Insurance Company





Chrysler Huber foundry. Source: atdetroit.net



Rolling hall, Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Complex. Source: Moore, Andrew, *Disassembling Detroit*

automobiles, trucks, buses, and their parts and peripherals. Because Detroit was so centrally located, with good connections to road, rail and water, it became a hub for the distribution of automotive and related products made locally, regionally, and nationally.

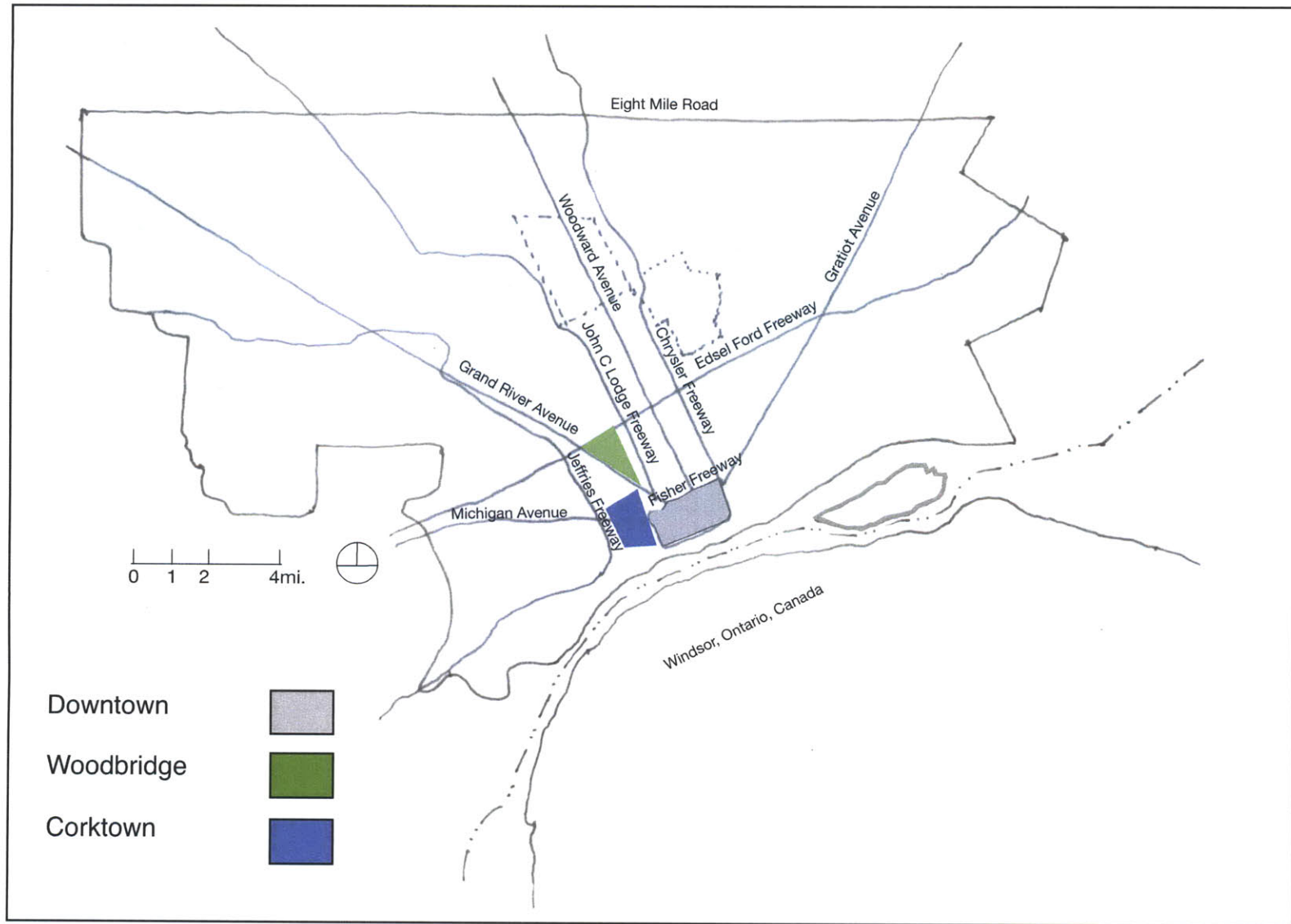
Several large automobile and automobile parts factories were built within the city limits, transforming the urban landscape. Architect Albert Kahn built multiple buildings for GM, Ford, and Chrysler, including the Highland Park and River Rouge Ford plants. These factories were not purely functional buildings, and many were built with a clear and elegant architectural language. Many of those factories today, beautiful though vacant, are elegiac symbols of the emptiness of the city.

As the major automotive companies flourished, the population expanded rapidly. Waves of immigrants came from Europe. Black and white workers came up to Detroit from the rural south. Low-density neighborhoods with their single family houses expanded to

the north, the east and the west of the city to house those populations.

By the post-World War Two period, when the automobile industry was at its prime and the city's population was still expanding, Detroit had become a black and white city. However, by the mid-sixties it was no longer a city where blacks and whites lived together. Many of the immigrant populations, Eastern European Jews, Poles, French Canadians and Germans had moved to more newly built parts of the city, along Woodward Avenue, Michigan Avenue, Grand River, and Gratiot. These new neighborhoods were similar to the ones they'd left, single family houses, on 3,000 square foot to 5,000 square foot lots. Front yard, house, back yard, alley and then the reverse on the other side of the block. Though these people were moving to neighborhoods within the city, they were moving away from downtown and towards the suburbs. At this time Detroit also began an aggressive program of building expressways, from downtown to its outlying neighborhoods and on to small towns, east, north, and west of the city, which were to become Detroit's sprawling suburbs.

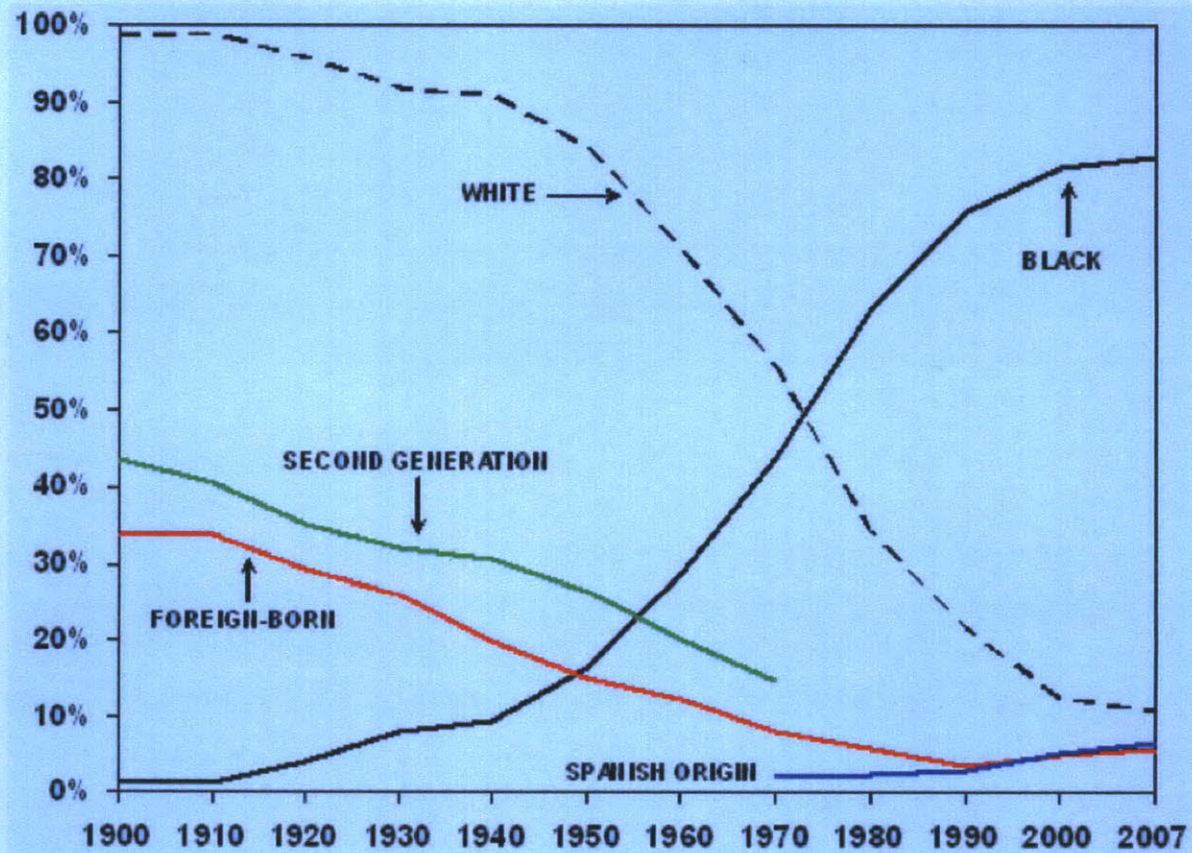
By the sixties Detroit was also a large, vibrant, forward-thinking city with excellent schools, renowned museums, and a homegrown and world famous music business, Motown Records. The labor unions were a progressive force in the lives of both white and black Detroiters. The UAW grew powerful along with the expansion of the automobile companies, and the two were often at odds regarding benefits and workers rights. The UAW was one of the first major unions that agreed to organize black workers. In the 1950s, Walter Reuther, then the head of the UAW, and a shrewd and skillful negotiator for the workers, created the Health Alliance Plan, one of the country's first HMOs. The white population now lived on the



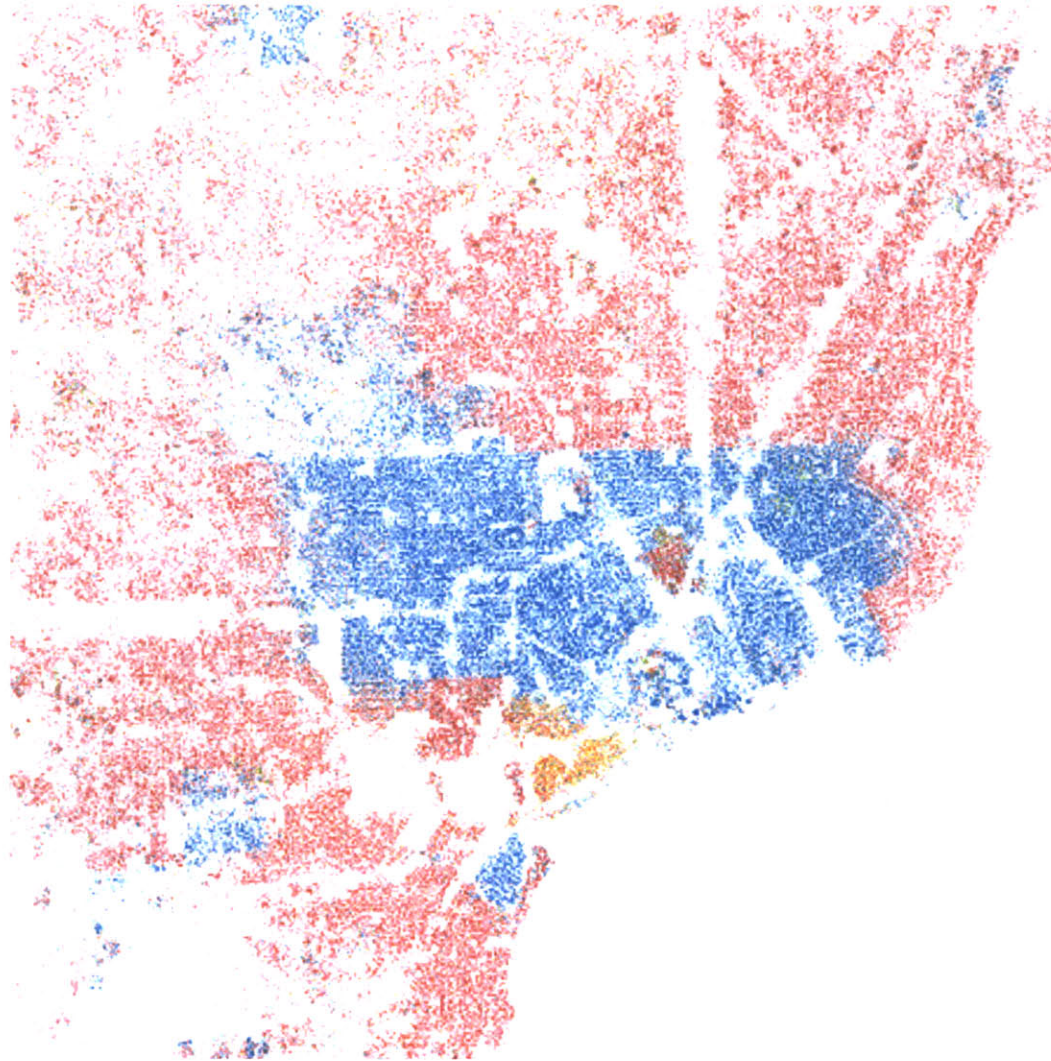
Map Of Detroit, Michigan, 2011 Showing Downtown, Corktown and Woodbridge.



### Composition of the City of Detroit; 1900 to 2007



Racial and National Composition of Detroit 1900 to 2007. Source: [www.detroit1701.org](http://www.detroit1701.org), U.S. Census 1900-2007



Racial balance in Detroit mapped by Eric Fischer, Red represents White, blue represents Black, green represents Asian, orange represents Hispanic, gray represents other, and each dot represents 25 people. Data from 2000 U.S. Census. Source: [www.bit-player.org](http://www.bit-player.org)



edges of the city and the black population lived closer in to downtown in the older neighborhoods. Like many U.S. cities in the sixties, Detroit had become a segregated city.

In July 1967 Detroit police raided an after-hours club where the return of two black Vietnam veterans was being celebrated. Everyone there was arrested and as they were being carted off to jail, a melee ensued. Looting, burning, and a full-blown race riot went on for five days, with the National Guard called in by the Detroit police. In the end, 43 people were killed, nearly 80% of them black (Herman 1987, 2). One of the effects of the race riots was the flight of fearful white residents and retailers from the city, leaving the population of Detroit mostly black and the population of the suburbs mostly white. Many middle class blacks left as well, resettling in Southfield, River Rouge and Livonia. The graph on page 17 shows the transformation of Detroit during the twentieth century from a nearly all-white city to a nearly all-black city. The map on page 18 shows the racial population differences between Detroit and its suburbs.

### **Detroit in Decline**

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, due to global competition and a resistance to change, the American automobile industry began to suffer a long slow downturn. The downturn was exacerbated by the effects of the lifting of international trade barriers (Garreau 1981, 77-79).

Depopulation, degradation of social and physical infrastructure, and white and middle class black flight to the suburbs continued for years and exacerbated Detroit's population decline. Detroit's supersized highway infrastructure and its low-

density residential neighborhoods seemed not at all problematic in the days of full employment and cheap gasoline. In the late 1960s and the 1970s cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Portland, Oregon realized that highways were not the sole answer to their transportation needs. By taking advantage of public sentiment, political clout, and changing subsidy legislation, these cities expanded and/or created highly functional public transportation systems. Later, these cities, even though highly auto dependent, could also provide viable public transit choices. Detroit, which once had an extensive system of street railways and buses, turned its back on public transit. Instead, from the fifties through the eighties, Detroit never imagined the city's future and the infrastructure problems to come. Where other cities now have more balanced mass transit systems and highways which serve both city and suburbs, Detroit has an inadequate bus system and an oversized street system. Over twenty per cent of city residents do not own cars. (Greenwood 2009). In Detroit, transportation accessibility substantially favors its suburban populations, as accessibility means auto ownership and automobility.

The problems of Detroit today were not caused only by the collapse of its heavy industries or by suburban sprawl, (although Detroit has plenty of sprawl). Here is the problem: Detroit is primarily a city of single-family houses, in neighborhoods that developed along with its streetcar lines and bus networks. The city has oversized streets on the north-south, east-west axes and along its French inspired diagonals. It always lacked the density that some cities have, where residential housing types include a mix of apartment buildings, two and three family houses and single-family houses. It is surrounded by and intersected by freeways and now lacks a viable public transit system. The last name brand supermarket left in 2007, citing the lack of a viable customer base. 80% of Detroiters do their food shopping at fast food restaurants, package stores, gas stations, or convenience stores, where fresh, healthy food is in short supply

(Dowie 2009). This lack of mobility, and the lack of stores selling fresh food in the neighborhoods, qualifies most Detroit neighborhoods as food deserts. Just as the physical health of Detroit's infrastructure is eroding, so is the health of its citizens. Today, life north of Eight Mile Road is suburban, with better infrastructure and less vacancy and abandonment. Ferndale, just north of Eight Mile, has a lively and diverse retail district, while the once thriving Livernois and Seven Mile shopping district in Detroit has many vacant and boarded-up shops, a lot of fast food, and a variety of auto oriented retail uses. Life south of Eight Mile Road is very much urban. The boundary makes a clear divide between city and suburbs.

A wilderness when Antoine La Mothe Cadillac created its first post-Native American settlement in 1701, Detroit became urban in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, unlike most American cities, at the beginning of the twenty-first century Detroit has, in large part, become rural again. Once many houses were torn down and the land left untended, the natural prairie ecology of the site re-emerged. Many of Detroit's schools, businesses and residential neighborhoods are now surrounded by open land where prairie plants bloom and pheasants roam wild. One could see this as a nostalgic, romantic return to the land farmed by Native Americans, or like Pierre Bélanger in 2008, one could see this condition as a relationship between urban decline, infrastructure, and landscape ecology.

“Decline seems to have become the progenitor of ecological regeneration. As a catalytic infrastructure, landscape is rendered visible at the precise moment at which the city fails”  
(Bélanger 2009, 84).

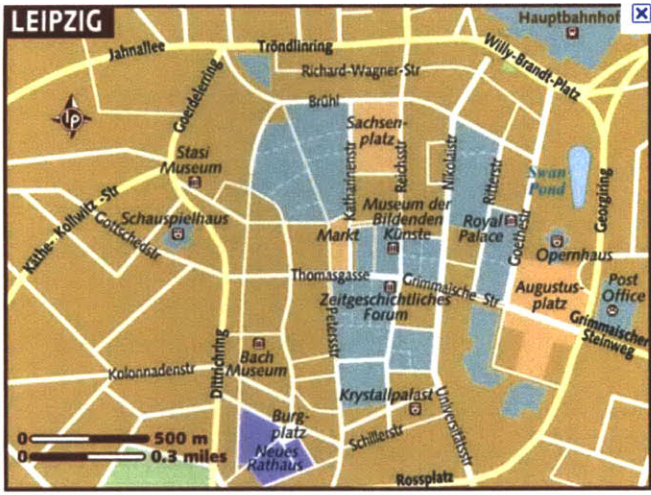
This vacantness and abandonment exists on the edges of most of Detroit's viable neighborhoods (Woodbridge, Corktown, The Villages). Here, the cognitive dissonance of vibrant communities with suddenly vacant edges is as

unsettling as the empty, ruined high rise buildings, the abandoned train stations and assembly line plants associated with Detroit. Although this city and its landscapes are often quiet and calm, this land can also seem desolate and menacing. As Kevin Lynch noted, major problems grow out of this emptiness:

“When an entire landscape has ‘gone to waste’, we face one of the most painful environmental changes, and one moreover that we are least prepared to deal with, shrinkage and abandonment. It is a shift that is borne unequally as groups are left behind with obsolete facilities in a broken society. The wasteland creates a disturbing image of death and decay. Yet economic growth and exterior change will often require emigration and progressive abandonment”  
(Lynch 1972, 191-192).

As Detroit, its economy, and its infrastructure deteriorated there have been waves of efforts and projects to repair it. Among the construction projects are suburban-style public and private housing projects, new sports stadiums, and three frighteningly oversized casinos rising up out of vacant fields, always paired with excellent highway access and plentiful parking.

In office since May 2009, Mayor David Bing has created “Detroit Works”, ([detroitworksproject.com](http://detroitworksproject.com)) a process and plan to improve and make more dense viable neighborhoods, while shrinking and possibly decommissioning deteriorated neighborhoods. A broad-ranging series of policy audits by outside consultants was completed in December 2010, and community meetings are underway. It is unclear what the final form of the plan will be or whether it will be executed.



Map of Leipzig. Source: Lonely Planet.com



Leipzig Hauptbahnhof. Source: Wikipedia Commons

## Chapter Two

### Shrinking Cities Precedents

Leipzig, Germany, the first precedent I have chosen, is a European city, which, like Detroit, had issues of shrinkage and abandonment, but has the government support typical of a European city. I have also chosen to examine Youngstown, Ohio, which although much smaller than Detroit has similar depopulation and industrial decay issues, and has developed a forward thinking plan that deals with the issues of shrinkage and right-sizing.

### Leipzig

*I began my thesis work during the summer of 2010 with a trip to Detroit followed by a trip to Leipzig: two shrinking cities. On arriving in Leipzig, I thought I'd come to the wrong place. Compared to Detroit, Leipzig looked prosperous and stable. It didn't seem at all like a shrinking city. I arrived at the Leipzig Hauptbahnhof, one of Europe's largest train stations, damaged by Allied bombing in*





Johann Sebastian Bach, St.Thomas Kirche, 2010.



Leipzig Opera. Source: virtualtourist.com

*World War Two, and rebuilt by the German Democratic Republic after the war. A new tunnel connecting the station to the pedestrian shopping streets of downtown is under construction today.*

*That shopping district is lively with office workers and shoppers by day, and calm but not at all desolate at night. The cafes, restaurants, and shops are interspersed with churches. These are not just any churches, but the Nikolai and Thomas churches, where Johann Sebastian Bach composed and conducted his cantatas every Sunday morning in the eighteenth century. The oldest symphony orchestra in the world - the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra - is the center of a lively classical music scene. Perhaps the most important place in Leipzig's recent history is the Nikolai church, where democracy-seeking East Germans gathered to organize the successful and pivotal movement for reunification. I wondered whether, like many European cities, Leipzig's problems are on its edges. Journalist Rick Del Vecchio describes Leipzig's shrinkage landscape as: "...the 'perforated' type. It's checkered with declining and vibrant districts" (Del Vecchio 2007).*



Leipzig. Source: shrinkingcities.com



2009 photo of Leipzig courtesy of Nella Young.

*Throughout much of the city there are blocks of houses that have been restored with occasional run-down or abandoned houses in-between. A Leipzig friend told me that five or ten years ago the majority of the houses were run down with only occasional fixed-up houses. Leipzig has, in some ways, turned the tide, but it's clear that its rebuilding will not be exactly in the mold of its industrial past.*

Most of the vacant areas are on Leipzig's east side and at the Grunau housing project. Before reunification, Leipzig, the largest city in Saxony, was successful on commercial, cultural and industrial planes. It was a center of coal-mining and chemical production, as well as the key location for trade and commerce in Saxony. After reunification the combination of privatization and closure of state industries reduced the number of jobs available in Leipzig. From 1990 to 1995, many Leipzig residents moved to jobs in the former West Germany. Leipzig's population shrank from 593,000 in 1990 at the time of reunification to 430,000 in 2010.





Photo of Leipzig light rail vehicle. Source: Bombardier Quebec



Stadthäuser - New Townhouses. Source: Stadt Leipzig

At the time of reunification, in 1990, Leipzig was grim. Its beautiful late nineteenth and early twentieth century warehouses, apartment buildings, and churches were in tatters, and the city appeared down at the heels. The focus of post-reunification rebuilding and revitalization was in Leipzig's historic center: the railway station and shopping mall, the merchants' warehouses, and the downtown shopping streets. The support of the German government and the ultra-wealthy private sector of reunified Germany made these projects possible.

Since reunification, over 34,000 semi-detached houses were built in Leipzig's suburbs. Even as the city was being rebuilt in the second half of the nineties, there was flight from the city of Leipzig to its suburbs, as city residents looked for and found the tranquility of the suburban ideal. On the northern edge of Leipzig, a twenty-first century peri-urban district has developed and flourished. Connected by a new motorway to the central city, and responding to the needs of the global economy, the airport, freight transport center, Trade Fair Complex, and Zaha Hadid-designed BMW plant



BMW Leipzig. Source: Zaha Hadid Architects



Spinnerei Exterior and Landscape. Source: Leipziger Spinnerei

are symbols of the new Leipzig. An expanded light-rail system now connects city and suburbs ([www.shrinkingcities.com](http://www.shrinkingcities.com)). In addition to the revitalization of Leipzig's historic core is the repurposing of the enormous cotton mill, the Spinnerei, in Lindenau, on the western edge of Leipzig. The Spinnerei, the district around it, and now all of Leipzig have become a center for the making and sale of contemporary art, with artists and gallery owners traveling between Leipzig, Berlin, and New York.

Raul Barreneche described the Leipzig art and development scene in 2006:

“Leipzig's evolution is a familiar tale of art and real estate. Artists flock to where they can find cheap apartments and studios, energize the neighborhood, and eventually get priced out as rents soar. It has happened in New York's SoHo, London's East End, even Williamsburg. But in Leipzig's case, it's an entire city attracting a creative class— and so far the city is still affordable” (Barreneche 2006).

The rebuilding of Leipzig's historic center was well documented by the Shrinking Cities research project, directed by Berlin

architect Phillip Oswalt, also director of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation. The Shrinking Cities project has had the support of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, and of the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation. In 2010 the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation sponsored “Less is Future-19 Cities-19 Themes”, an exhibit of responses to depopulation in nineteen mid-sized cities in Saxony Anhalt.

In his 2010 essay for the exhibition catalog Oswalt states:

“Shrinkage is not a new phenomenon. Yet since the outset of industrialization, we have experienced a historically unique period of growth in which everything burgeoned: the population, the economy, towns and cities, prosperity”.

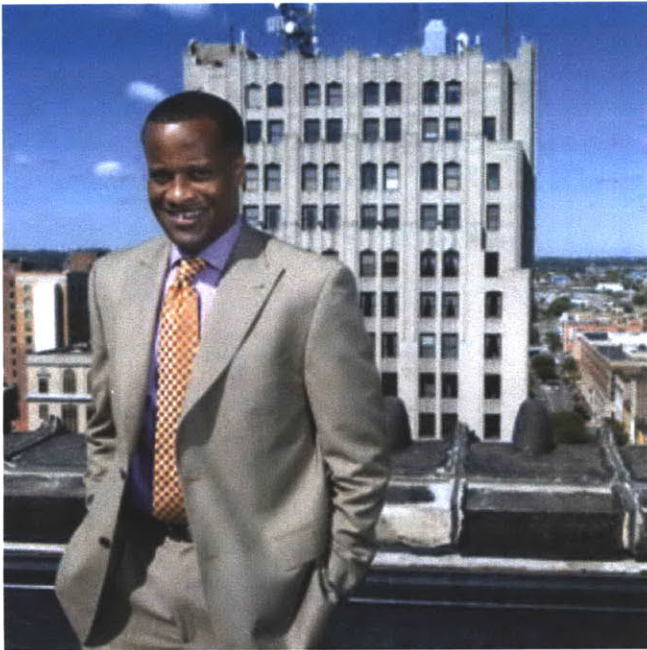
“Despite rapid urbanization in the countries of the south, one quarter of all cities in the world are losing inhabitants”.

“Growth is taken to be the primary objective of the political and economic measures taken in all countries. It is assumed to be the most important solution for all contemporary issues. The German government, for example, recently passed an Acceleration of Growth Act. By contrast, shrinkage has become a taboo subject” (Bohmer et al. 2010, 24).

Oswalt describes the economic, social, and political bias toward growth and the taboo against shrinkage. I believe that as citizens, planners, and leaders we often make the judgement that a city that was once industrial, strong, and dense, after abandonment must be industrial, strong, and dense again to be considered healed or successful. More nuanced and less absolute ideals about the future of the abandoned city should be considered.



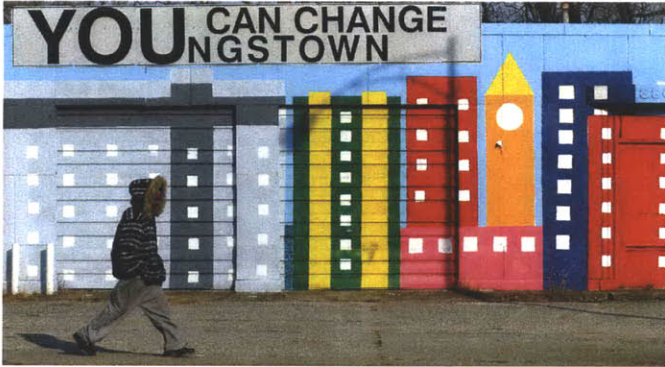
## Youngstown



Youngstown Mayor, Jay Williams. Source: governing.com

Youngstown, Ohio is located in the middle of the Rust Belt. Like other midwestern cities such as Detroit, Flint, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Gary, Youngstown suffered major population loss throughout the second half of the twentieth century as steel and other related industries declined and eventually shuttered their urban mills. Youngstown's peak population of 170,002 in 1930 was reduced to 66,982 by 2010. Youngstown attempted to rebuild itself on the model of Pittsburgh, which recovered from its post-rust belt low-point by repairing and rebuilding a great deal of its infrastructure and taking advantage of its knowledge base (Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh). Pittsburgh rebuilt its downtown and its neighborhoods and brought the service and banking industries to the traditional industrial zone along its rivers.

Youngstown began the twenty-first century with a plan to recreate the economic life of the rapidly shrinking city. In 2002, Jay Williams, then Community Development Agency director, worked



Youngstown. Courtesy of Brian Snyder



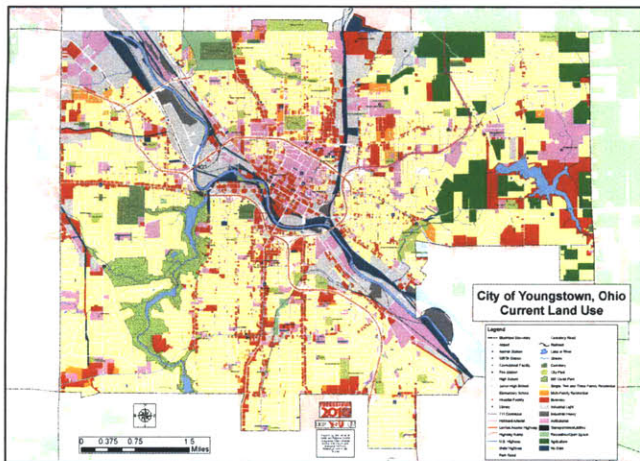
Downtown Youngstown from afar. Source: city-data.co

with the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at Youngstown State University to launch the “Youngstown 2010” plan. Williams’ plan went beyond the strategy that Pittsburgh followed. The plan took a more radical approach to urban redesign than other U.S. cities have, in several different ways.

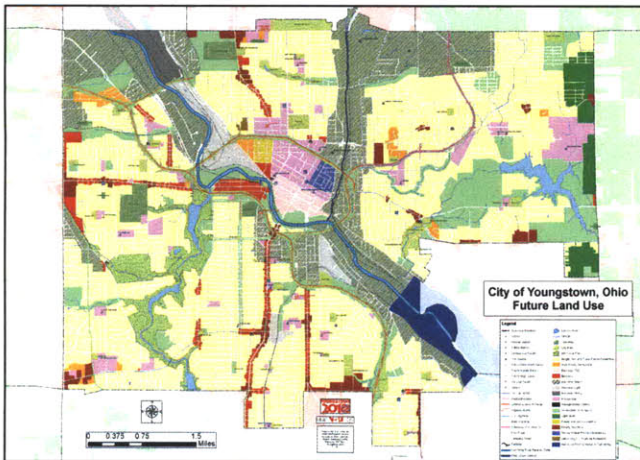
First, Williams and his team made a plan to “rightsize” Youngstown, to make the city a smaller and better place to live. They identified viable neighborhoods as well as areas where there wasn’t enough population to support the infrastructure. They made plans to remove roads and sidewalks and sewer pipes and to curtail fire, police, 911 and school services to those areas.

In addition, this plan was designed to create more permeable surfaces, expose the natural springs and streams trapped underground and provide land to be used in a land trust. The land in those land trusts could become parks, urban farms, greenways and would encourage private or non-profit stewardship of publicly owned lands. Third, he created overlay zones, to allow new land uses for old designations so that Youngstown could attract new,





2010 Plan: Current Land Use. Source: City of Youngstown



2010 Plan: Proposed Land Use. Source: City of Youngstown

cleaner, greener industry, with the intention of making Youngstown an economically feasible and environmentally responsible city (Bélanger 2009, 84).

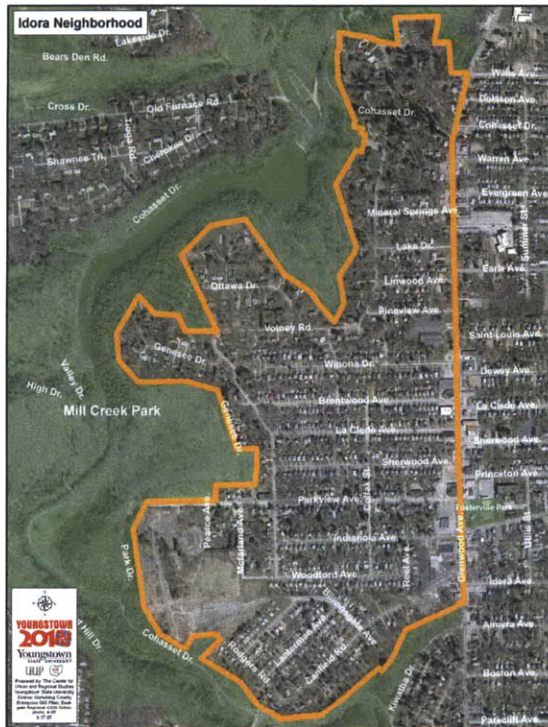
Most radically, Williams approached Youngstown not as an isolated city but as an element in a regional plan. As well as developing a downtown incubator for new software industries, and a rebuilt zone for new clean industry, Williams saw that Youngstown's urban residential neighborhoods could be rebuilt to make the city attractive as a bedroom community for both Cleveland and Pittsburgh. It is clear to me that Williams' conceptualization of urban and suburban Youngstown is not as simplistic or linear as that of the New Urbanism transect. In the spirit of landscape regionalism, the 2010 plan conceives the edges of the city as elastic rather than inelastic, and does not dwell on the evils of sprawl. Instead Williams sees Youngstown as part of its regional landscape, sometimes playing a suburban role, and sometimes an urban one. Williams looks at the world from above, seeing patterns and thinking about Youngstown as part of its region, as a system.



The plan, launched in 2002, was finalized in 2005 while Williams, who is now Youngstown's Mayor, was still Director of the Youngstown Community Development Agency. This visionary plan has had only limited success. Writing in The Detroit Free Press, John Gallagher claims that the idea of giving people \$ 50,000 to move to another neighborhood hasn't worked. More than six years after the plan's finalization, nobody has been moved. Gallagher wonders whether Detroit's Mayor Bing has studied Youngstown's lack of relocation success (Gallagher 2011). (Mayor Bing, through his Detroit Works plan, is developing a similar citywide initiative to rebuild some Detroit neighborhoods while decommissioning others). Gallagher quotes Jay Williams as saying in 2011: "the idea of moving people always was more theoretical and academic than a core part of Youngstown 2010" (Gallagher 2011).

There has been some success in Youngstown. Gallagher describes Idora, the Youngstown neighborhood targeted to serve as a pilot project for the redevelopment of Youngstown's residential neighborhoods. While Idora suffered from residential abandonment, lack of retail, and high crime, it had potential for renewal. On the Mill Creek, Idora was able to directly take advantage of the extensive Mill Creek Park. It had good river views, a small but diverse housing stock at a range of scales and values, and a strong neighborhood association. The City of Youngstown and local non-profits demolished houses, planted urban gardens, and encouraged the return of retail to the area.

Today Idora is considered a healthy, viable neighborhood. And the Youngstown Business Incubator has attracted a core of entrepreneurs and software businesses to Youngstown. But crime rates are still very high and in Youngstown most neighborhoods still suffer from depopulation, high crime and failing schools (Gallagher 2011).



Williams' idea of shutting off parts of the city and reclaiming its industrial core for newer, cleaner industry won great praise from landscape urbanists and some urban planners (Bélanger 2009). Mayor Williams is well aware that this transition has not happened, but looks at the success of the Youngstown 2010 as one of image change: from rust-belt failure to city in recovery. In his February 2011 interview with Gallagher he said: "I think we've broken that initial stagnation. It really is a journey and not a destination" (Gallagher 2011).

Leipzig and Detroit have in common their abandonment and their heavy industrial bases. One difference between them is the strength of the federal economy in Germany in the nineties, just after abandonment. In addition, for two decades both the federal government of Germany and the regional government of Saxony contributed both significant financial resources and clear political will to create a new Leipzig. The situation in Detroit today is the opposite of post-reunification Leipzig. The federal, state and

municipal governments that could potentially support Detroit have highly constrained budgets. As public administrations (especially municipal and state) change, committed financial resources and political commitments can disappear. U.S. heavy industry, specifically the auto industry, is not able to contribute funds or build new factories, as BMW recently did just outside of Leipzig. Detroit does have the resource of generous foundation funding. The Kresge, Kellogg, C.S.Mott and other foundations are all generous supporters of research and redevelopment in Detroit.

Foundation funding can also come with limitations. While adequate for commissioning studies, foundation funding is often inadequate to implement the proposals those studies generate.

Youngstown, is in a way, like a miniature Detroit. It has similar rust-belt problems. But its smaller scale, (thirty-six square miles versus Detroit's one hundred thirty-nine square miles) and the fact that its mayor is the former planning director, created a different framework for its plan. The planning process in Youngstown took three years as planners actively sought out the advice and the ideas generated by the community. Mayor Bing's approach is quicker (proposed to be twelve to eighteen months long) and more top-down. Bing is asking for the reaction of the neighborhoods, rather than seeing them as generators of the plan (Gallagher 2011). It is unclear whether Mayor Bing will have the longterm power, vision, and flexibility to complete and execute the ideals of his Detroit Works project.

## Chapter Three

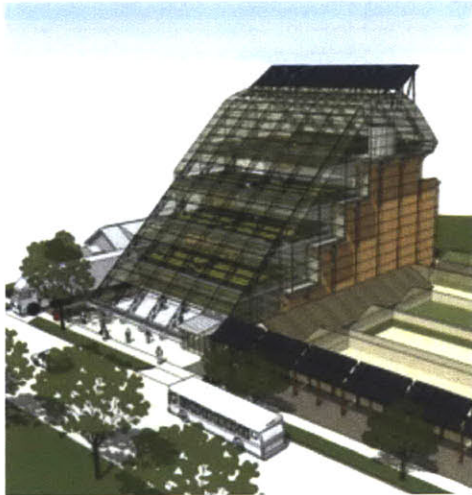
### Urban Agriculture Precedents

#### Growing Power, Milwaukee Wisconsin

Whenever I tell someone that I am studying urban agriculture as a method for repairing the urban fabric of Detroit, they ask me if I know about Will Allen and Growing Power in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It doesn't matter whether the questioner is an Ivy League-educated urbanist or the driver on the MBTA's number 1 bus line. Some know about Will Allen because he is the focus of the food film *Fresh*. Some know him because he played college and professional basketball. Some know him because he received a MacArthur "genius" fellowship in 2008. I know him because Growing Power, his urban farm in Milwaukee is one of the few non-profit urban farms that operates at a commercial scale. At the same time Growing Power is a project that provides social and economic development opportunities for Milwaukee and for the growing number of communities it now serves. Growing Power has become not only an urban farming resource for its Northwest Milwaukee community, but also a training center for potential non-profit and for-profit urban farmers nationally, and an "ambassador" to South Africa and Zimbabwe. Whether in the U.S. or in Africa, Allen's enthusiasm and passion for farming is charismatic. After working with Will Allen and Growing Power as part of the Clinton initiative, President Bill Clinton declared that Will Allen was his "hero" (Herzog 2009).

Who is Will Allen and why is Growing Power so influential and important in the urban agriculture movement ?





Growing Power Agroponic building.  
Source: The Kubala Washatko Architects, Inc.

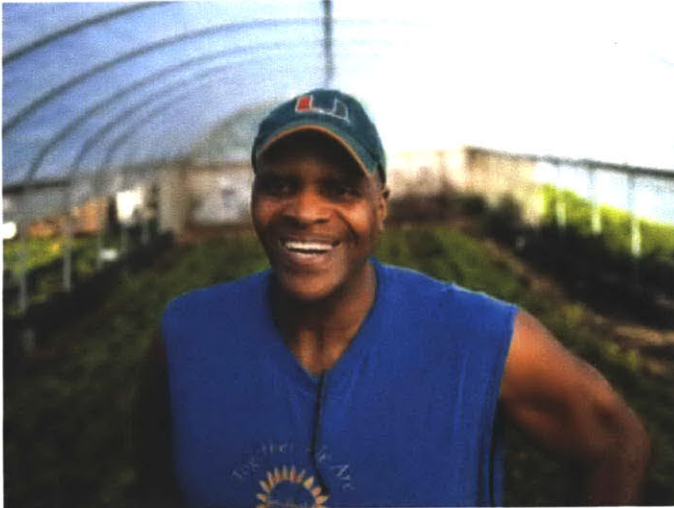


Will Allen at Growing Power. Source: Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

Allen, who grew up on a farm in Rockville, MD, has life experiences that include college, professional basketball, corporate marketing work at Proctor and Gamble, and a lifelong love of farming. His farm, in operation since 1995, initially on only two acres, has expanded and formed a network of urban farms in Milwaukee. Between them they produce several tons of food per year.. As is true of most people working in the urban agriculture and food justice movement, a key goal for Allen is to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe, and affordable food. Growing Power is now active in both urban and rural areas and has farms in Wisconsin and Illinois, and affiliates in several other states. Allison Arieff, writing in *Good*, describes Allen perfectly when she says:

“ Allen's philosophy is simple: food should be grown where the people are. In the context of modern agriculture-with its enormous supply chains and industrial- sized farms located thousands of miles from market-that's a fairly heretical notion, but it supports a growing trend: the development of regional, sustainable food sheds. In tackling the larger, systemic issues of food production in this country, Growing Power isn't just growing food-it's working to solve a maze of interconnected issues, and enabling communities to produce, market and distribute their own food in a sustainable manner” (Arieff 2010).





Will Allen at a workshop to erect a hoop house at D Town farm in Detroit. Source: Detroit Black Community Food Security Network



Vermiculture: California Red Wigglers, Havana, 2011.

Growing Power uses all the tools and technologies available: aquaponics for combined fish and vegetable production, composting, vermiculture, raised beds, and hoop houses to provide low-cost, high quality fruits and vegetables to food deserts, and underserved communities. Because he feels that food distribution is as important as food production, Allen assures that those community residents will have access to various types of CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) food boxes available at less than market rates. Expanding to rural areas and adjacent states, Growing Power is now exploring meat production. Allen is one of a small number of black men in urban agriculture, a field which is dominated by white women.

Both Allen and Malik Yakini, who runs the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and the D-Town farm, are aware and willing to talk about the often negative connotations farming has for blacks who are descendants of slaves and sharecroppers. Will Allen doesn't ignore this potentially racially loaded situation when he says:

“Many African Americans who said they’d never farm again are going back to the land, even to their ancestral rural lands in the South. Ten years ago, they would never have come on board with this revolution. They’d say, ‘that’s ‘slaves’ work.’ So it’s very satisfying, and it’s important, to see this change because they often represent the most food insecure communities” (Hoffner interview, Grist.com).

Allen sees this is as an issue without race, gender, age and non-profit/for-profit boundaries:

“So we’re starting to see this as a multi-cultural, multi-generational grassroots ‘revolution’ – even the top-down types, the corporations and politicians and universities want to get on board, after fighting small-scale farming for so long, and that’s fine, we need everyone. We need millions of new farmers doing small-scale agriculture” (Hoffner interview, Grist.com).

Allen makes clear his understanding that Growing Power provides an alternative, and shows how food production and distribution can provide health, economic and community-building benefits for communities. Growing Power is a two acre organic farm on the edge of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. It is small but powerful. But there are few farms like it anywhere in Milwaukee or the U.S. The organopónico system in Cuba is extensive and nationwide, but it is composed of hundreds of farms just the size of Growing Power.

## **The Urban Agriculture Programs of Havana, Cuba**

In Havana there are organic farms throughout the city. Urban agriculture has done a great deal to solve a nationwide food shortage, a major structural issue in Cuban society. The urban agricultural response in Cuba not only provided food, but encouraged the Cuban people and government to revise policies about sustainability and about private enterprise. In 1959, after many hard-fought battles, the government of Fulgencio Batista was overthrown and Fidel Castro took over as Premier and later President of Cuba. At first, the United States government was hopeful that it could continue to have business dealings and diplomatic ties with Castro's Cuba, purchasing sugar from and selling food to the Cubans. When the Cuban state seized all property other than personal residences, President Dwight Eisenhower instituted an embargo against Cuba, preventing purchases of Cuban products as well as sales of U.S. products to Cuba. This policy was codified in 1996 by the U.S. Congress as the Helms Burton legislation. Under Batista the U.S. Cuba food relationship had followed a basic colonial model: Cuba grew sugar and other crops for export to the U.S. and other countries and then purchased food from the U.S. for consumption by Cubans. Suddenly Cuba had lost both her primary market and her primary supplier. Cuba needed to purchase food, oil, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. When the U.S. embargo began to have an effect on Cuba, the Russians stepped in. For thirty years they sold Cuba food, fertilizer, pesticides, tractors, and fuel at very low prices, and bought sugar, coffee, and rum at very high prices. Even though these purchases took place between socialist countries, Cuba's agricultural practices continued under the colonial model with inputs that were inexpensive and subsidized by the Soviet Union and were clearly destructive to the Cuban environment (Kozloff 2001, 413-414).



Raised beds at Organopónico Alamar, East Havana Municipality, Havana, 2011.



Quail eggs, Villa Hortensia, Artemisa Province, 2011.

In 1991, after the Soviet Union dissolved, the Cubans were again in a desperate situation. The end of Soviet aid spelled the end of easy chemical input importation. Cuba could no longer import 1,300,000 tons of chemical fertilizers, 17,000 tons of herbicides, and 10,000 tons of pesticides yearly. In addition it lost its sugar markets and its primary source of food to feed the nation (Morgan 2006). The ten years that followed were called the “special period”, a time when Cubans experienced shortages of nearly everything. People were in desperate need of food, fuel and medical supplies (Murphy 1999).

Since there were no chemical inputs available, the Cubans became organic farmers by default, planting as much vacant land as they could find, converting vacant residential lots, planting strips along highways, and construction debris dump sites to urban farms. As of 2010, in two decades, on a nationwide basis this new system created 350,000 new jobs to bring the total to five million. These agricultural workers are not only earning more than they had before; they are now well paid by Cuban standards.

Four million tons of fruits and vegetables, mostly organic, are produced every year in the Havana region, satisfying between 80% and 90% of the city's produce needs (Fisher 2010).

Because all land except personal residences belongs to the state, the Cuban government made land available to those who want to be farmers throughout the city of Havana and its suburbs. Plots up to 33 acres are given to the farmers in usufruct for 20 to 40 years. The English word "usufruct" derives from the Latin expression "usus et fructus", meaning "use and enjoyment". In Havana it means land on free loan to collectives, who pay the state a modest fee or tax before they divide the profits. Some farms are run on land the farmers inherited from their parents, as people were able to keep their residential land at the time of the revolution. There are three types of urban farms in Havana:

1 **Autoconsumos** are on-site at schools, hospitals or businesses, both in Havana and the suburbs. They provide fruits and vegetables for the workers' lunch. The workers can also buy their produce at reasonable prices.

2 Over 4,500 **organopónicos** in Havana cultivate their produce in raised beds as a way to help them deal with often contaminated soil in their gardens. They compost heavily, and practice crop rotation to intensify their yield.

3 **Huertos intensivos** are intensive gardens in urban and suburban settings without raised beds. The fruits and vegetables are planted directly in highly composted soil.





Intercropping practice, Organopónico INRE, Playa municipality, Havana Province, 2011.



Sunflowers planted to attract beneficial insects, Organopónico INRE, Playa municipality, Havana Province. 2011.

In all three Cuban farm types, flowers are planted along the side of the beds to attract beneficial predator insects that will kill the aphids or other pests that might attack the fruits and vegetables. The Cubans do not yet have an organic certification program like that of the USDA. While most small scale agriculture in Cuba could meet USDA Organic certification standards, the Cubans are more relaxed about testing. Some farmers openly admit that when necessary chemical inputs are used. Not often discussed in Cuba is the question of what will happen if the embargo is lifted. U.S. companies like Monsanto and ADM are eager to sell the Cubans genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Cuba might be eager to grow fruits and vegetables again for the U.S. market, most likely on a large scale. The impressive outputs of produce seen in Havana would not exist without the many forms of support the highly centralized and controlling state system provides to its farmers. By making unused land available to aspiring farmers, hundreds of city and suburban previously vacant lots are now in intensive food production. The state made it legal for farmers to sell their produce directly to consumers at their



Vedado Farmers Market, Playa municipality, Havana Province, 2011.

farmstands, and opened farmers markets throughout Havana and other cities. Because there is high demand in Havana for fresh produce, and because the government deregulated prices, most farmers earn about five hundred dollars a year - over three to four times the salary of the average Cuban worker (Fisher 2010).

In almost every municipality from Havana to Guantanamo there are garden centers where farmers can buy seeds, tools, compost, and vermiculture materials at very low prices. Both university based agroecologists and technicians, similar to US extension agents, make on-site visits to farmers to troubleshoot, give seed, soil fertility and pest advice, and to foster the flow of information from farm to research lab and back again. "Urban agriculture" in Havana would be called "suburban agriculture" in most U.S. cities. On a recent trip to Cuba, I saw several farms of small commercial scale. They ranged in size from two to twenty-four acres. None of them were in dense urban neighborhoods. Most farms were either just within or on the edges of Havana, or in adjacent municipalities.





Food Project farmers. Source: The Food Project

## The Food Project, Boston MA

In Boston there is an agriculture project that intentionally has farm plots in the city and in the suburbs, in part to focus on community building between urban and suburban communities. Begun in 1991, in Boston and several of its suburbs, The Food Project is more than an urban agriculture project. It is known in the community as a model for the integration of sustainable agriculture, experiential learning, leadership training and food justice. Each summer about 140 paid high school student interns and many more volunteers from inner city and suburban communities join forces to farm 37 acres of land in Dorchester (one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods), in Lynn, (an industrial town past its prime on Boston's North Shore), and in Lincoln, (one of Boston's leafiest, wealthiest suburbs). The teens participate as well in the distribution and sales of food through Community Supported Agriculture programs, farmers' markets, and hunger relief organizations. The element that makes these projects so powerful is the collaboration between teens from radically different socio-economic backgrounds working together in each other's

communities. Through the tasks they take on, the urban and suburban teens develop leadership skills and prepare themselves for work and life in a more diverse world. Very real issues of race, class, and economic and social justice are discussed and explored through their work in the fields, and in group meetings.

Recently, The Food Project has begun work in Dorchester neighborhoods to build raised beds (filled with heavily composted organic soil) so that individual residents can raise food for themselves, in their own backyards. The Food Project model of training teens to work together on agricultural and food distribution tasks is successful and well known locally, regionally, and nationally. Recently they have formed The Food Project Institute to provide training, consulting services, books and manuals to individuals, corporations, community groups, and municipalities interested in learning The Food Project model and its related skills and expertise. The Food Project is also working as a founding member of Real Food Challenge, a student-centered initiative to get fresh and healthy food into schools ([www.thefoodproject.org](http://www.thefoodproject.org)).

The work of The Food Project, like so many social justice-based agriculture projects, is always about developing relationships between gardeners, as much as it is about growing food. The work The Food Project has done in Boston and in its suburbs, creating racially and economically mixed teams who garden as a group on city and suburban plots, has done a great deal to bring young people together in Boston, a northeastern city which still suffers from racial divisions.

## **Why These Precedents ?**

I chose Growing Power in Milwaukee, Havana's Urban Agriculture system, and The Food Project in Boston as precedents because of their similarities as well as their differences. All three are committed to the practice of sustainable agriculture, to food justice in their communities, and to student involvement in the work of the farms. My interest in Havana is to describe a program in a country where the power of the state is used to support the almost desperate needs of the Cuban people for food, even if this means allowing state land to be used for individual gains, an act which would not have been acceptable in the earlier days of the revolution. In addition, the Cuban system of support for scientists and technicians in their agroecology research on behalf of farmers, and the provision of low cost seeds, tools, and compost is another of the potential advantages of working in a country where the state has absolute power to help its citizens.

Both The Food Project and Growing Power are non-profits that work directly in their communities with paid workers and volunteers to grow food, distribute food, and in different ways build community. Both of them involve young people in their work, and both have gone beyond work in their home cities, as consultants to and trainers of other communities. The Food Project is run by an enthusiastic and professional staff. Growing Power is run by the presence and the entrepreneurial spirit of Will Allen, a nationally known, charismatic leader.

Finally, let us consider the relevance of Growing Power, Havana, and The Food Project to Detroit. Havana in many ways has the least relevance, as it is an extremely dense city, a city where open space is often hard to find. On the other hand, the development of the organopónicos, which sell food at their front-door farmstands, and send food to kiosks and





Black raspberries, Earthworks Urban Farm, Detroit 2010.



1891 Shed at Eastern Market, Detroit, 2010.

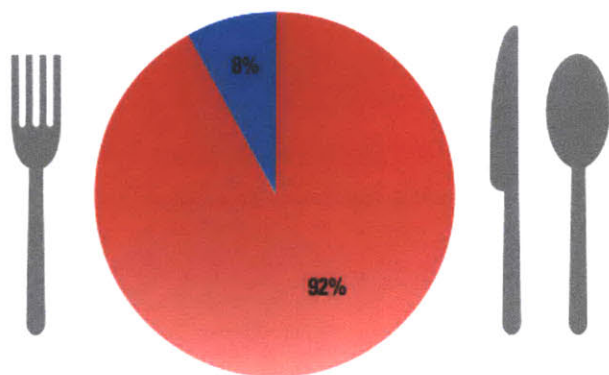
farmers' markets in the city, would certainly be relevant and helpful to the Detroit farmers. Will Allen already has a presence in Detroit, through his relationship with and support of Malik Yakini's work. The city-suburban connection that is a central part of The Food Project could help suburban Detroiters - and their children - reconnect with the city they abandoned, in a safe and meaningful way.

### **Urban Agriculture in Detroit today**

Kimberley, Hodgson, writing in *Urban Agriculture: Growing Healthy Sustainable Places*, a 2010 publication of the APA, describes the urban agriculture movement in Detroit:

"...Detroit has gained a well-deserved national and international reputation as a haven for urban agriculture projects. In addition to hundreds of backyard gardens, the city is home to more than 600 community, school, and institutional gardens. And these tallies do not account for the guerrilla gardens and small farms where neighbors use land without obtaining permission from its owners" (Hodgson et al. 2010, 73).

**Chart 2:** Recoded Mainstream and Fringe Food Stamp Retailers in Detroit



Pie Chart Legend

**Fringe Retailers: 92%** Gas stations, liquor stores, party stores, dollar stores, bakeries, pharmacies, convenience stores, and other venues

**Mainstream Retailers: 8%** Small, medium, and large grocery stores and supermarkets

Mainstream and Fringe Foodstamp Retailers in Detroit.  
Source: Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group

Detroit has a long history of urban farming. It began with the legacy of the French ribbon farmers in the eighteenth century, continued in the nineteenth century with the potato patch gardens started by Mayor Hazen Pingree to employ and produce food for indigent Detroiters, and occurred again in the twentieth century as thrift gardens during the Great Depression and victory gardens during World Wars One and Two (Holli 1968, 71-72).

Given this tradition, contemporary agricultural responses to Detroit's ongoing crisis of vacancy and depopulation are not surprising. In the 1970s, in response to the city's growing vacantness, Mayor Coleman Young suggested farming as a way to use the vacant land. The city started a program called Farm-A-Lot and provided land, seed, tools, and technical help to Detroiters willing to grow food. Over forty years later, this tradition continues, as does the concept of urban agriculture as a solution to Detroit's problems around vacancy. Today, as well as widespread concern with the infrastructure problems caused by vacancy, there is a concern that nearly all of Detroit

is a food desert. See Mari Gallagher's chart on p.49. In 2011 Detroit has little fresh and healthy food, but it has abundant vacant land, plentiful water resources, high unemployment rates, and a burgeoning network of urban farms and farmers. As a result, Detroit, now at ground zero of accessibility to fresh food, has the potential to become the American city that has most radically changed the type and quantity of food made accessible to its residents.

### **Three Scales of Urban Agriculture**

#### **Household Garden**

There are three types of urban agriculture practiced in Detroit. The first type is the household garden. These tend to range in size from pots of tomatoes on the deck to as much as a quarter of an acre. Here, the produce is not normally sold, but is consumed by the household or given to friends and neighbors.

#### **Community Garden**

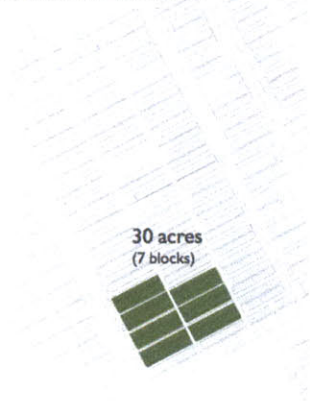
The second type is the community garden. These range both in type and size. Some are assemblies of plots gardened by residents of a given community. Others, usually a bit larger, are organized by faith communities and non-profits. Detroit has many of both types. Earthworks Urban Farm is a project of the Capuchin monastic community on Detroit's East side. Nearly all that is grown is consumed by guests of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. This garden, like so many of the non-profits, includes an educational component, providing summer employment and farm training to teenagers in the



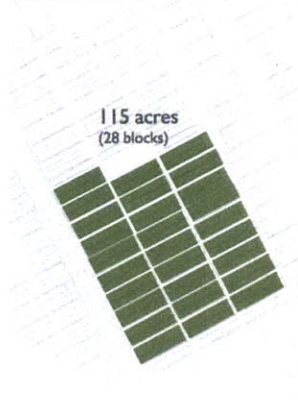


John Hantz. Source: The Detroit News

SHAR Farm scale (30 acres)



Hantz Farm scale (115 acres)



SHAR Farm and Hantz Farms compared. Source: Detroit Works

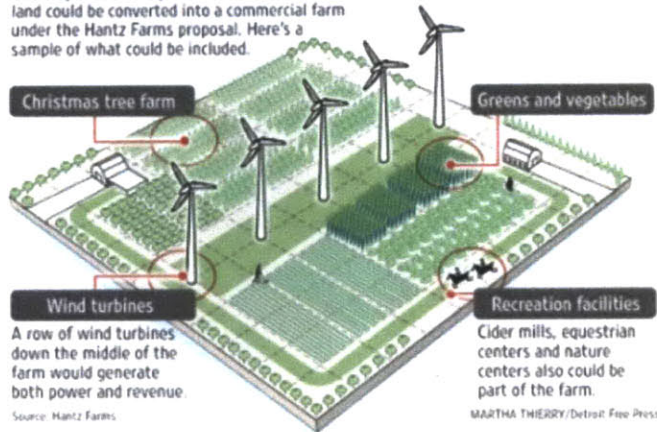
garden community. These gardens tend to range in size from a quarter of an acre to four acres. While non-profit, many are entrepreneurial, selling produce at neighborhood farmers' markets and at Eastern Market.

### Commercial Scale Farm

The third type of urban agriculture project is defined primarily by its difference in size from household or community gardens. These gardens, usually more than four acres in size and often much larger can operate in a for-profit or a non-profit mode. There are few such models in the U.S to evaluate. Two quite large projects in this category, are proposed for Detroit, and are awaiting planning approval. The for-profit project is Hantz Farms. John Hantz is a Detroit resident, investment banker, and entrepreneur whose Hantz Group, based in suburban Southfield, has 500 employees. At roughly 2,000 acres, this would be the largest for-profit urban farm in the U.S. Hantz plans to invest as much as \$30,000,000 and to build not only a farm but also an agriculture education center, and a global urban agriculture innovation center: "the auto show of

### Farming on vacant city land

One way that a 10-square-block area of vacant Detroit land could be converted into a commercial farm under the Hantz Farms proposal. Here's a sample of what could be included.



Hantz Farms (proposed), Detroit. Source: Hantz Farms, *Detroit Free Press*



Earthworks Urban Farm, Detroit. Source: m-bike.org

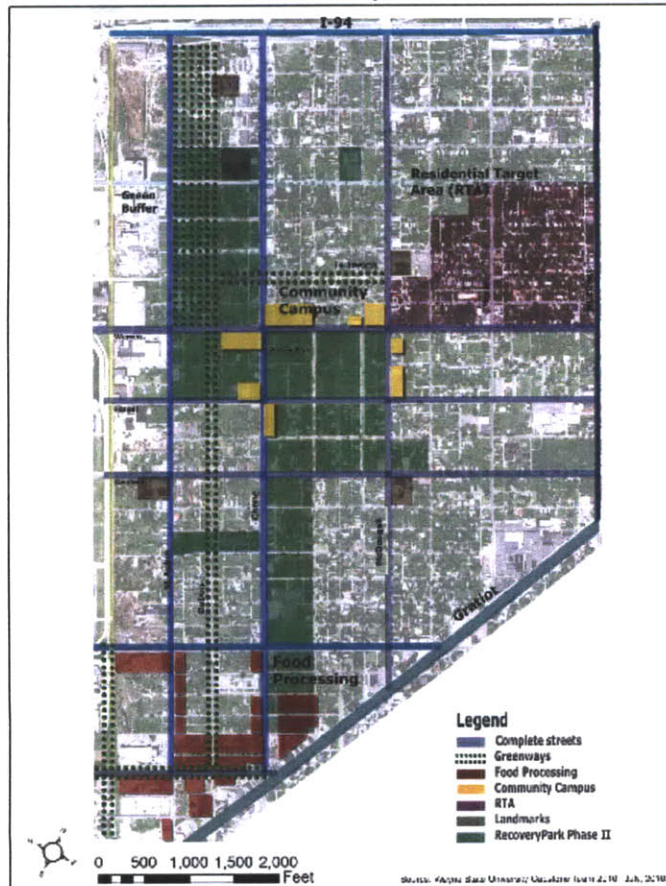
urban farming” (Kavanaugh 2010). As of summer 2009 Hantz was already buying vacant land adjacent to land owned by the city. He has asked the city of Detroit to tax this land as agricultural rather than residential or commercial land and to contribute 30% of the vacant land to Hantz Farms (Berman 2009).

Proponents of Hantz Farms agree with Hantz that urban agriculture must be done at a large scale to be profitable for the farmer to provide substantial economic development opportunities for Detroit. At the same time local detractors claim that Hantz will build an industrial farm that will exploit workers and use toxic fertilizers and spray chemical pesticides in Detroit’s neighborhoods. In addition they point out that Detroit’s urban agriculture community has been the caretaker of public land in absence of the kind of public support Hantz is seeking for land assembly and preparation (Hodgson et al, 2010, 73).

Also on Detroit’s east side, SHAR’s Recovery Park project is not-for-profit, community based, and mixed use. Designed with the



## The Community Plan



SHAR Recovery Park Plan, Wayne State University Urban Planning Capstone Project, 2010. Source: Wayne State University

assistance of students of Wayne State University planning professor Robin Boyle, and University of Detroit Mercy architect Dan Pitera. Recovery Park is slightly smaller than Hantz Farms, and is integrated into the fabric of the neighborhoods it serves.

As well as the actual farms in existence or proposed for Detroit, there is a broad and committed network of organizations providing soil, seeds and tools as well as technical, scientific, financial, and educational support to the urban agriculture community.

Probably the most inclusive and the most representative of these organizations is the Detroit Food Council. The council was created by the Detroit City Council in 2009 and includes most of the leaders of Detroit's food system organizations as well as representatives from the Mayor's office, from the City Planning Commission, and from the City Commission on Health and Wellness.

I met with three council members this winter, Daniel Carmody, Director of the Eastern Market, Malik Yakini, Director of the Detroit



Dan Carmody at Eastern Market. Source: Les Ward



Malik Yakini at D-Town Farm. Source: Marvin Shaouni

Black Community Food Security Network, and Kathryn Underwood, planner with the Detroit City Planning Commission.

Carmody, an Illinois based city planner was recruited in 2009 to come to Michigan to operate the Eastern Market. The Market is primarily wholesale, but sells farm products to the Detroit - and suburban public - on Saturdays year around. Carmody is at the same time wise, energetic, and realistic. He has worked with local urban farmers to create the "Grown in Detroit" brand, which features produce from Detroit farmers only. Dan is not doctrinaire. He is a proponent of organic, sustainable farming, but sees that his mission is to provide good fresh food for everyone in Detroit. If Detroiters cannot afford organic carrots, he wants them to have another option. Dan is trying to add additional retail days to the market's schedule.

Malik Yakini is a man who is deeply involved in making certain that black people in Detroit have access to fresh, healthy food. As well as running the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and its D-Town farm, Yakini is the head of a Detroit charter school





Kathryn Underwood, Detroit Planning Commission.  
Source: translearning.net



Grown in Detroit at Eastern Market, 2010.

with an Afrocentric curriculum. He explained to me, as had people at Earthworks, that the urban agriculture community in Detroit is mostly white, and that there is sometimes hostility expressed at the idea of white people suggesting that black Detroiters return to activities of the soil.

Kathryn Lynch Underwood is a native Detroiters who came to city planning from her experience as a community activist and urban farmer. She is the most knowledgeable person I spoke with about Detroit's zoning for urban agriculture, as she is the planning commission staff member with the assignment of developing zoning policy to support and regulate urban agriculture. She, as well as the rest of the Food Policy Council, has travelled nationally and internationally to tell the story of urban agriculture in Detroit, and to learn about urban agriculture models in Torino, Copenhagen and throughout the United States.

There are people in these networks who feel that there is so much vacant land in Detroit that all who want to should be able to farm here. They are willing to support Gary Wozniak, the passionate director of SHAR's Recovery Park project farm, and to support



Sunflower sprouts for sale at Eastern Market, 2010.

entrepreneur John Hantz. Others, taking a more hardline social justice stand, want to stop Hantz's project and fear that his urban farm is only a land holding strategy and that Hantz Farms will eventually be destructive to neighborhoods.

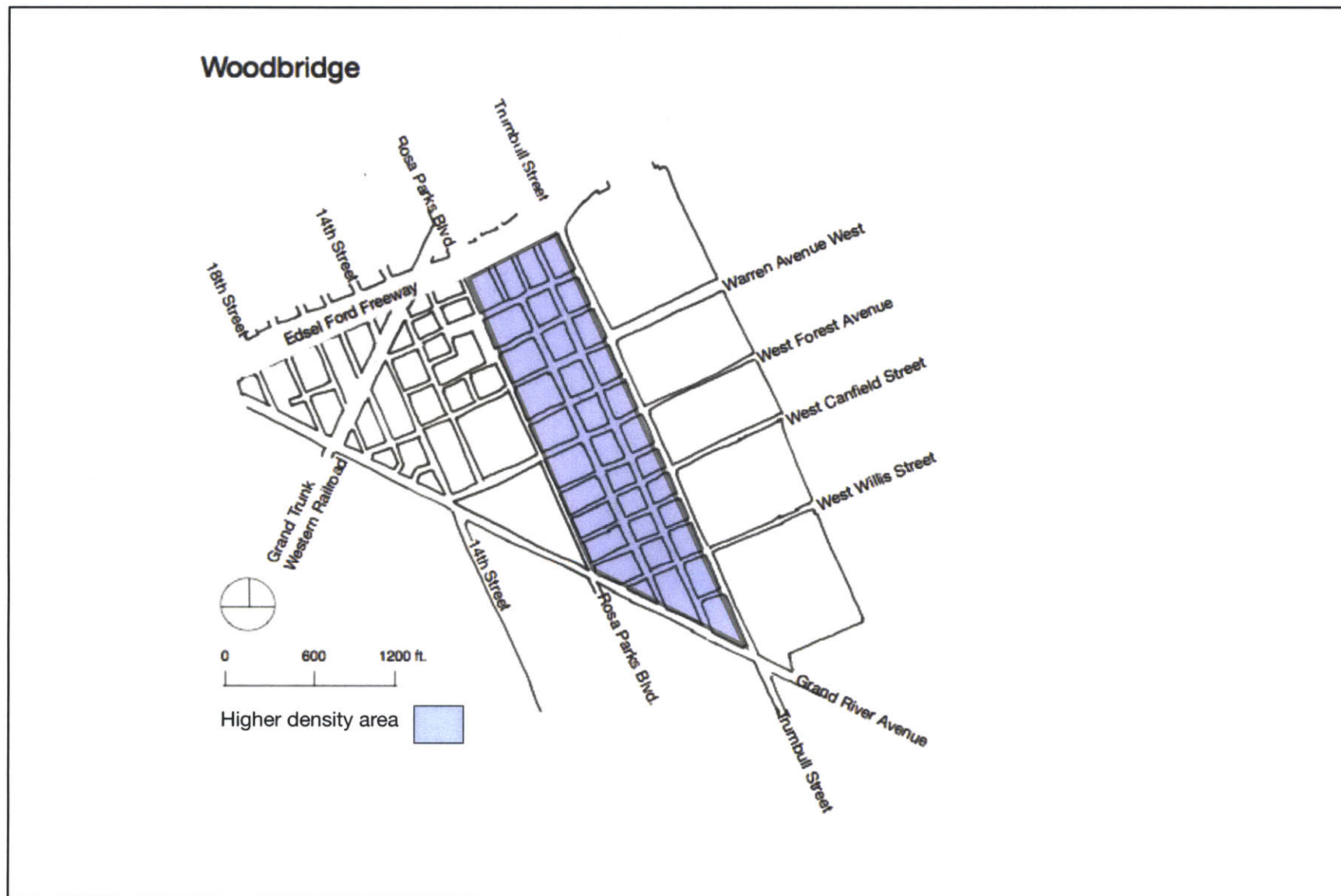
Detroit's urban agriculture network is wide ranging, comprehensive and active. It crosses race, class and economic lines. Mark Bittman, writing in the *New York Times* about the Detroit's urban agriculture community said:

Food is central. Justice, security, a sense of community and more intelligent land use have become integral to the system. Here, local food isn't just hip, it's a unifying factor, not only among African Americans and whites but between them (Bittman 2011).

There are at least 1,000 gardens in Detroit. But the city is so big and there is so much open land that the quantity of those gardens isn't really evident. My sense of the state of urban agriculture in Detroit is that it is like small bits of dough about to congeal and be rolled out as pastry. The network and support system is in place to nurture a much larger system, one that can produce a great deal of

food for a city in need of fresh, healthy and local food. However, there is an element of coordination in the Detroit urban agriculture process/community that still seems elusive.





Woodbridge Neighborhood, Detroit, Michigan, 2011.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Two Viable Detroit Neighborhoods: Woodbridge and Corktown**

*This chapter will introduce the reader to Woodbridge and Corktown, two neighborhoods in Southwest Detroit. I provide a personal introduction to each neighborhood, followed by a brief neighborhood history, and a description of neighborhood retail, transportation and urban agricultural conditions. Each description closes with profiles of community members I met in my walks through the neighborhood. These studies provide a background for the proposed of urban agriculture and policy interventions that follow in Chapter Five.*

#### **Woodbridge**

Woodbridge is, by Detroit standards, a viable neighborhood. Woodbridge has varied, substantial, and mostly occupied housing stock, proximity to employment, educational and cultural institutions, and a network of activist residents. While healthier than many Detroit neighborhoods, it has lost its retail core. Woodbridge has significant amounts of vacant housing and land, and suffers from urban fabric degradation, especially at its western edge.

*I was introduced to Woodbridge in July 2010 by Greg Willerer, a farmer from nearby North Corktown who sells greens to the Woodbridge Pub, when I accompanied him on his produce deliveries to local restaurants. Working in his garden and doing deliveries with Greg was the key to interviewing him. In the growing season he is busy from dawn to dusk, but is*



Western Woodbridge, 2011.



Day-lilies and two-family houses,  
Woodbridge, 2010.

*happy to talk as he works. In his pick-up truck we zipped two miles up Rosa Parks, over the Edsel Ford Freeway, under the Grand Trunk Railroad overpass, took a right and headed through the Woodbridge neighborhood to Trumbull and Merrick where the pub is located. The ride was amazing, as we travelled totally empty streets, and saw green fields alternating with car strewn vacant lots, occasional empty houses, empty schools, empty factories and warehouses. I spent my childhood in Detroit, but this was a foreign place, the South Bronx alternating with Appalachia. Late that morning I went to the Woodbridge Pub, met the owner Jim Geary and his staff, and had lunch.*

*After lunch I wandered around the neighborhood. What I found was a total change from the vacant lots and boarded up houses of Greg's crosstown route. Just as the ride along the edges of Corktown and Woodbridge was surprisingly grim, this neighborhood reminded me of vibrant neighborhoods in Brookline and Jamaica Plain. It was a warm summer afternoon. Children were riding bikes on the quiet north-south streets, and people*



Vacant lot, Western Woodbridge, Summer 2010.



1796 Collot Map of Detroit and Windsor showing “arpents” or ribbon farms. Source: [historicalcharts.noaa.gov](http://historicalcharts.noaa.gov)

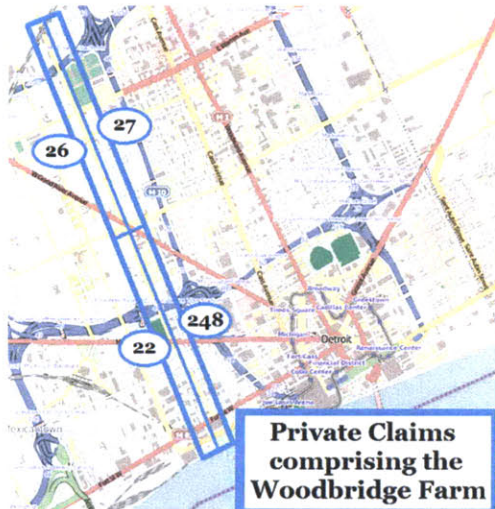
were hanging out on the second story porches of the two-family houses.

*As I walked west through the neighborhood I found more and more boarded-up houses, empty school buildings, and vacant lots. While the residential streets in the heart of the neighborhood were quiet and well-cared for, the streets on Woodbridge’s western edges (especially Rosa Parks and Grand River) were quiet and wrecked, and almost totally lacking in retail life.*

## Woodbridge History

For the majority of its lifetime, Woodbridge didn’t have these problems. Like nearly all neighborhoods in Detroit, Woodbridge began as a French farming community. In 1747 Robert Navarre established a farm on the Detroit River that was 560 feet wide and extended three miles to the north, just past what is now the Edsel Ford Freeway, the northern border of Woodbridge. Later in the nineteenth century, William Woodbridge, the second governor of Michigan, bought that “ribbon” farm. He then purchased the





Map showing Woodbridge Farm and ribbon farms. Source: Paul Szweczyk



Single family house, Woodbridge, 2011.

adjacent farm and owned a farm roughly 1100 feet wide and over three miles long. After Woodbridge's death in 1861, the land was purchased, platted and developed by Charles Hodges and his firm Hodges Brothers. The Hodges brothers did a great deal to develop Woodbridge. But it was the streetcar that made Woodbridge a desirable place to live and helped to fuel its expansion. Soon after Detroit's first streetcars began running in 1863 Woodbridge became one of Detroit's first streetcar suburbs. Queen Anne, Greek Revival, Georgian Revival, and Second Empire houses were built in Woodbridge before 1900 for its early residents who were professionals, merchants and manufacturers (Farmer 1872) (Gallagher and Hill 2003).

After 1910, as the automobile industry was booming, immigrants arrived from Europe to work in the automobile industry. Many of these blue-collar workers moved to the new two-family brick houses that were being developed in the Woodbridge neighborhood. By World War Two the class structure of this early streetcar suburb had changed. The merchant and professional class residents had largely been replaced by immigrant factory

workers. In the fifties Woodbridge saw the construction of the Detroit Industrial (Edsel Ford) Freeway on its northern edge which separated Woodbridge from the neighboring community to the north, now called Northwest Goldberg. The white population of Detroit had moved toward its edges leaving the population of its urban core mostly black. The sixties were in Woodbridge, in all of Detroit, and in the rest of the nation, a time of racial segregation and great upheaval.

After the race riots of 1967, retail store owners packed up and left the city for the suburbs. To many people outside of Detroit, the image of the city is one of ruined buildings and vacant land. Detroiters know that the scarcity of retail life, especially the lack of food-based retail in the neighborhoods, is just as significant. Life and activity on lively retail streets can be the lifeblood of a neighborhood. By the mid-1970s Woodbridge had lost that source of community energy.

At the same time Wayne State University was looking for expansion space for its athletic fields and targeted the eastern edge of Woodbridge, which is just to the west of the university. This part of Woodbridge was given the designation "University City A". As a response to the University City designation, the neighborhood, as yet unnamed, took the name Woodbridge and applied for Historic District designation to slow down the demolition process. The Woodbridge neighborhood was not successful in its efforts to stop the urban renewal project. Houses from Trumbull to the Lodge Freeway were demolished to make the site ready for the construction of a new community. The result is a 47-acre, mixed-income suburban style development of freestanding single family houses, attached houses, three story condominium buildings, renovated elderly housing towers, and a strip commercial center. To give the project a Detroit feel, the streets in the housing development are named for Motown Stars: Miracles Boulevard and Temptations Drive. When the forces of urban renewal revisited Woodbridge in 1981, this time to clear the houses West of Trumbull for

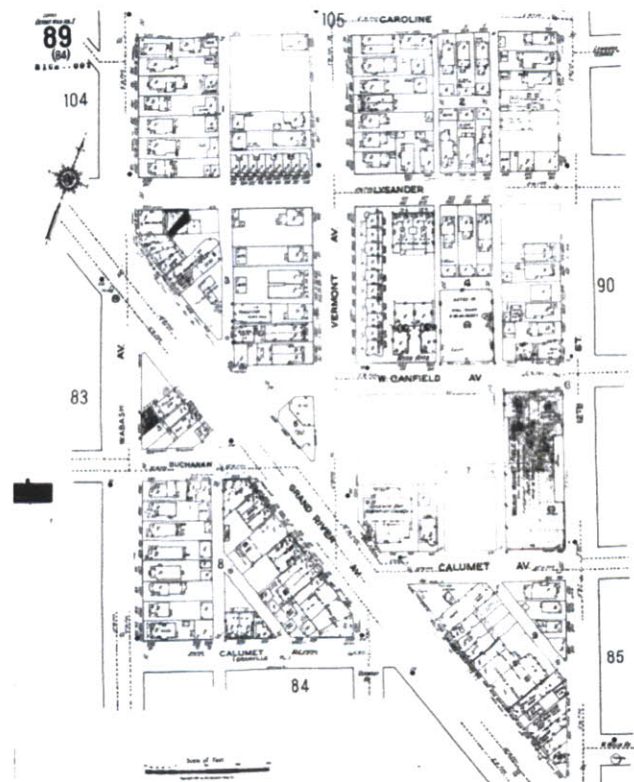


Racial Make-up of Woodbridge. Source: Mapping America: Every City, Every Block, New York Times/ 2010 Census Data

University City B, the Woodbridge neighborhood was ready. They neighborhood worked with associates of Saul Alinsky, a famed and skilled community organizer, and the Woodbridge residents were successful in stopping the project. The spirit of community activism engendered by this experience remains alive (Silverman 2002).

Wayne State University and the Woodbridge community now have a different relationship. The neighborhood, unlike most in Detroit, has gradually been gentrified over the past thirty years. Today's residents are Wayne State graduate students, City of Detroit lawyers, Wayne State faculty and staff, social workers, artists and teachers. While Woodbridge can have the transient feeling of any neighborhood populated by students, it also has many longterm residents and a network of committed neighborhood activists. It is racially mixed (52% white, 44% black, 4% other: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2009), economically stable, and relatively safe. The neighborhood relationship with Wayne State continues, and this time the university is playing





1952 Sanborn Map. Source: Detroit Public Library

a more benevolent role. During urban renewal the neighborhood fought Wayne State. Today the University Police patrol the neighborhood at night to encourage its safety. Many Woodbridge residents, even those without university affiliation, shop at the Wayne State Farmers' market, the closest place to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. There is a sense of hope in today's Woodbridge, rather than the fear of the future that one can sense in many parts of Detroit.

### **The edges of Woodbridge today**

A large portion of the western edge of Woodbridge, along Rosa Parks and Grand River is owned by the near-bankrupt Detroit Public Schools. As late as 1952 it was a fairly dense neighborhood of small houses and two family flats (see Sanborn map 1952). Retail stores were concentrated on Forest Street and Grand River. Today the land west of Rosa Parks (12th Street) to Grand River is mostly vacant. The Wilbur Wright High School on Rosa Parks was torn down in January, as a group of Woodbridge residents struggled to get financing to allow their community development





Empty lot with construction debris, Woodbridge 2010.

corporation to convert the school to residential lofts. After a building like the Wilbur Wright School is demolished, what is left is often just bare ground, but it is not tabula rasa. There are always some artifacts of the past: the road infrastructure, slabs of concrete from an old school building, a piece of copper roof flashing, an ornamental tree planted in the back yard of a house. As well as manmade artifacts there are often indications of the natural history of the site. The large vacant area at Rosa Parks and Canfield, called “central park” by Woodbridge locals, often holds standing water and is depressed below street grade.

The very northwest corner of the neighborhood has a different quality, and feels isolated from the core of Woodbridge. While most of Woodbridge has a combination of residential and commercial land uses, the northwest corner, where the Edsel Ford Freeway and Grand River converge is mostly residential and industrial, with most of the industrial uses related to auto repair and auto demolition. The Grand Trunk Railway overpass crosses this corner as well. The residential area has large parts of blocks that are vacant and returning to prairie.

## **Retail, Transportation, and Urban Farming in Woodbridge**

While retail life in Woodbridge is healthy by Detroit standards, it would be considered sparse in most American cities. The Woodbridge Pub is the only restaurant in Woodbridge, although there is a twenty-four hour Coney Island (fast food restaurant) in the neighborhood's northwest corner. Carl's Chop House, a long-famous Detroit steak house on Grand River closed in 2010. Woodbridge does have access to University Foods, a small full-service grocery store, two blocks from the intersection of Trumbull and Warren. The only other places to buy food are the Trumbull Market and the Value Dollar party store, both on Trumbull Street. Neither store sells fresh food.

Woodbridge, compared to most places in Detroit, is well served by Detroit Department of Transportation, Detroit's bus system. Bus lines 14, 18, 21 and 29 pass through the neighborhood. The shortest bus itinerary from Avery and Warren to Eastern Market, three miles away, is only 25 minutes, but requires a transfer and a walk of nearly half a mile between the second bus and Eastern Market.

Urban agriculture in Woodbridge occurs in two forms: the household garden and the community garden. On the household level one can find vegetables, flowers, and fruits growing everywhere: on second floor porches, former driveways, back, front, and side yards. I found no available statistics on the exact quantity and acreage of these gardens, but Eric Gaabo, a Woodbridge gardener activist, told me that six of the eight houses on his street (75%) had at least a small garden last year. Many others had considerably larger plots. Eric told me that one neighbor had "an experimental lily nursery" in his backyard. There is a community garden with six to eight plots on Merrick and Trumbull,



Detroit flowers, herbs and vegetables, June 2010.

across the street from the Woodbridge Pub but there are no larger scale gardens in Woodbridge. There is, most amazingly, a black walnut plantation is growing in northwest Woodbridge.

### **Reformers on the Edge**

Eric Gaabo, Ed Potas, Jim Geary, and Mike Olszewski are Woodbridge residents committed to improving Woodbridge by using housing, retail development, food retailing, and urban agriculture to strengthen its edges. Because Eric, Ed, and Mike have professional jobs outside of Woodbridge during the day their work in the neighborhood takes place at night and on weekends. Their commitment and interest appears to be serious and not at all part-time.

I met Eric Gaabo on a warm Sunday afternoon in November 2010 in his garden on the vacant corner lot at the corner of Avery Street and Warren in Woodbridge. Eric has a large flower and raised bed





Eric Gaabo. Source: [hourdetroit.com](http://hourdetroit.com)



Eric Gaabo's garden, @Avery and Warren.  
Source: Google Streetview, 2010

vegetable garden on this corner, which is two doors down from his house. He was putting the garden to bed for the winter and was at the same time willing to chat and answer my questions. Eric, 46, is an attorney for the City of Detroit, a neighborhood activist, a gardener and a collector of old granite artifacts. He and his wife moved to Woodbridge from suburban Ferndale eight years ago. Eric has an extensive collections of granite curbs, artifacts from demolished buildings, and other miscellaneous bits of stone. He's excited about the garage he's designed and hopes to build in his backyard, using his reclaimed treasures.

As well as his own garden, Ed has worked on the development of a tree farm further west in the Core City neighborhood, as well as the renovation of the former Wilbur Wright High School mentioned above. Until recently he was a commissioner of The Greening of Detroit, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting tree-planting and urban agriculture. As a city employee Eric is realistic about the issues of vacancy and infrastructure degradation, and about the complex nature of





Wilbur Wright School (demolished 2011). Source: Google Streetview, 2010

city politics. At the same time he is enthusiastic about the neighborhood and the potential of using urban agriculture to make Woodbridge a stronger community.

I'd seen a large abandoned brick building on Forest and Rosa Parks and when I asked Eric who owned it he told me that his friend Ed Potas had just bought it. Woodbridge is a fairly small community and all of the people involved in community building and community development projects seem to know each other. Ed and his wife both grew up in Detroit, moved to the suburbs, but eventually moved back because they liked the close neighborhood feeling of the community, the historic housing stock, and the affordable housing opportunities in Woodbridge. They've renovated a four bedroom house on Avery Street which they bought in 2000 and are active parents at Burton International School in neighboring North Corktown. As Ed said in an interview with *Model D Media*, "my house had been preserved by neglect. It was weathered and the woodwork had never been painted" (Wasacz 2007).

As well as starting the Woodbridge Community Development Corporation Ed is one of a group of Detroiters who run the



Ed Potas. Source: coolcities.com.

Architectural Salvage Warehouse of Detroit, located in the northwest corner of Woodbridge. The goal of the Warehouse is to deconstruct buildings, recover their salvageable architectural elements, and make them available to low and moderate income families. Like the Woodbridge Pub, running the non-profit warehouse is a chance for people to work together, to socialize and also to build community. This group of activist Detroiters tries to keep building materials “out of the waste stream” when buildings are demolished. Sometimes they miss out entirely and sometimes they are just one step ahead of the bulldozers.

When I was in Detroit in March Ed offered to take me through the building at Forest and Rosa Parks, which he has purchased on behalf of his non-profit development corporation. The Danish Brotherhood Hall was built around 1920. It was one of many lodge and cultural buildings built for immigrants from northern and eastern Europe who came to work in the automobile plants early in the century and settled in neighborhoods throughout Detroit. Today the building stands alone but when built it was part of the fabric of the street and the neighborhood. Ed, in his thirties,





Danish Brotherhood Lodge, Woodbridge 2010.

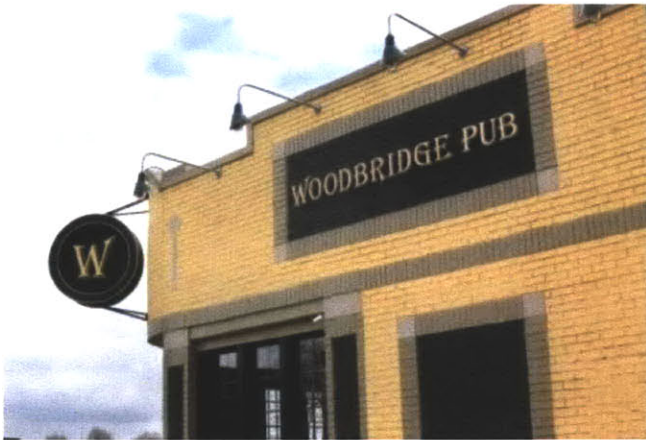


Danish Brotherhood Lodge in the 1950s.  
Source: detroiturbex.com

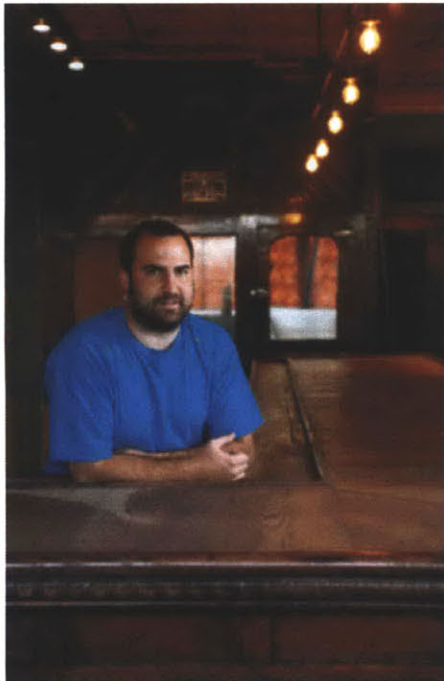
manages properties for Wayne State, and has ideas for its reuse by the Woodbridge community. It has a large theater space, ample backstage areas, two potential apartments, two small retail spaces, one of which will be a restaurant.

While Ed and his wife have a garden, he does not see urban agriculture as an appropriate longterm response to the neighborhood's vacant areas. He imagines that urban agriculture as a use in Woodbridge would only be temporary, until the city's needs space for industry, offices, or housing grows again.

Jim Geary's day job and his connection to the neighborhood totally overlap, as he is the owner of the Woodbridge Pub. Jim, 38, was a carpenter when he got the idea of building a pub. His goal was to create a place where people could eat, drink, talk, or just gather. To create the pub, Jim gutted a former "party store" which had been vacant for twenty-five years. He used lumber salvaged from Detroit buildings about to be demolished and found the wood for the bartop in a church in Saginaw. He is committed to sustainable agriculture and buys from local farmers whenever possible. While



Woodbridge Pub, June 2010.



Jim Geary at the Woodbridge Pub.  
Source: modelDmedia.com

Boston's chefs buy from the closest commercial farmers ten or twenty miles away in Sudbury or Carlisle, Jim need not go further than to Greg Willerer in the next neighborhood. There are a lot of people growing vegetables in Detroit, but not much of that produce makes it to the commercial market. Jim would buy more local produce if Detroit had a local distribution system like Red Tomato in New England.

Jim built the pub because he wanted to have a place in Woodbridge where he could spend time socializing with friends. Like pubs in English villages the Woodbridge Pub is the center of the community.

Mike Olszewski has had a dream of being a tree farmer in Detroit since high school. Today, this thirty-five-year-old Woodbridge housebuilder owns three former city-owned lots planted with 52 black walnut trees. Every year he hopes to buy eight vacant lots and plant fifty to sixty trees to build up his black walnut plantation. This is not a short-term urban agriculture project. Mike sees these trees as the source of his retirement income, since the trees take



about thirty years to mature. He is rigorous about planting only on land that he owns and has found ways to wade through the Detroit city bureaucracy to buy his lots.



Black Walnut Plantation. Source: Greenwood Nurseries



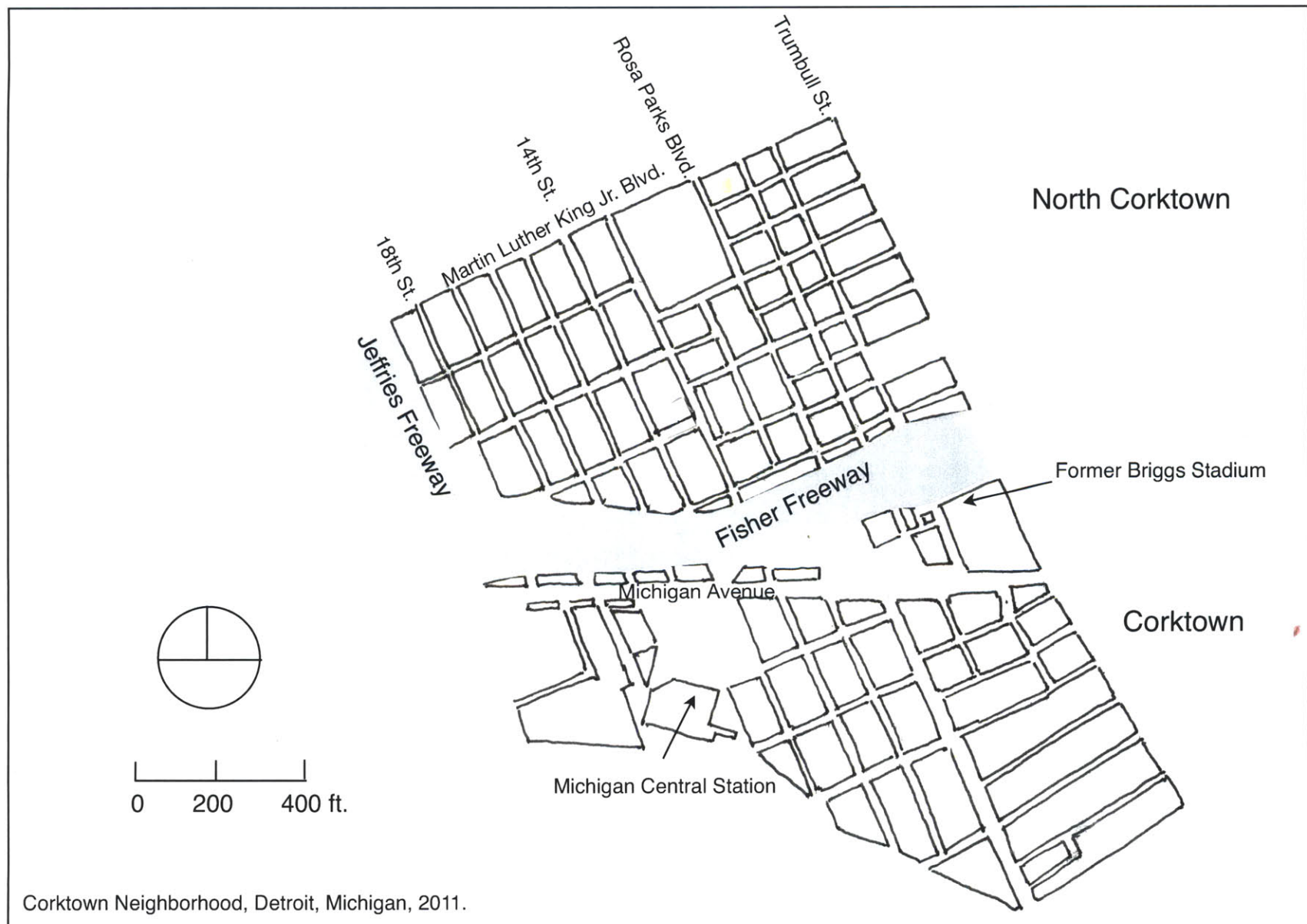
Western Woodbridge, 2011.



Western Woodbridge, 2011.

## Woodbridge Conclusion

Despite the strength and viability of the neighborhood, Woodbridge suffers from the two issues that all Detroit neighborhoods have today. Primarily, it suffers from vacancy and erosion at its edges. In addition, it suffers from a severe shortage of retail life, especially of stores and restaurants selling fresh, healthy food. Residents with cars can drive to stores around the city and suburbs to do their food shopping (Wasacz 2007). Residents without automobile access have fewer options and take long bus rides to jobs, friends, and food. Woodbridge is an active, diverse, and for Detroit, fairly dense community. The public retail realm that existed until the 1960s on Woodbridge's edges is no longer there. Especially on the western side of the neighborhood, where the Detroit Public Schools owns some large parcels, urban agriculture and food production businesses could repair the vacancy and enliven the edges. Since the land is mostly vacant, this twenty-first century patchwork and infill form of urban renewal would not destroy urban form and fabric, but could create new fabric for the existing Woodbridge community.







Hoop house @ Brother Nature Farm, North Corktown, 2010.



Field near Brother Nature Farm, North Corktown, 2010.

## Introduction to Corktown and North Corktown

Corktown, a neighborhood just over a mile from downtown Detroit, is complex, viable, and ripe for development. Its complexity stems from the fact that it was once one neighborhood, but in the early sixties when the Fisher Freeway was built, it became two: Corktown and North Corktown. Corktown is industrial, commercial and residential where North Corktown is almost entirely residential, and only occasionally commercial. Where Corktown has vacancies mostly at its edges, North Corktown has large areas of vacancy throughout. Many parts of North Corktown are more vacant than occupied.

*Last summer, on my first trip back to Detroit in nearly twenty five years, North Corktown was one of the first places I visited. I had read a lot about the city, and thought that as a designer and as a former Detroiter, I had some understanding about the scale of the city and about the nature of its neighborhoods. I was looking for Greg Willerer's Brother Nature Farm and began driving around somewhat aimlessly, almost dazed by the emptiness, the verdant*





The Casino is always in the background, North Corktown, 2011.



Michigan Station one mile in the distance from North Corktown, 2011.

*fields, the venerable trees, the remaining houses looking in the distance like simple Northern Michigan farmhouses. Where was I ? I was wondering around the western section of North Corktown, which runs roughly from Rosa Parks (12th Street) to 16th Street. This is the most vacant part of Corktown, with the most dilapidated housing stock. Many of the houses that are not boarded up and vacant are occupied but are falling apart. Most of the open land has been cleared and is in the process of returning to prairie. By day it is quiet and calm. Pheasants wander around, and the U.S. Postal Service delivers mail by mini-truck, not on foot. At the same time there are clear reminders of being in a city. There are rutted city side streets (which are seldom if ever plowed in winter), streetlights without lamps, and because the land is flat and the objects are large, there are long open views to very urban landmarks, like Michigan Central Station and the Motor City Casino.*

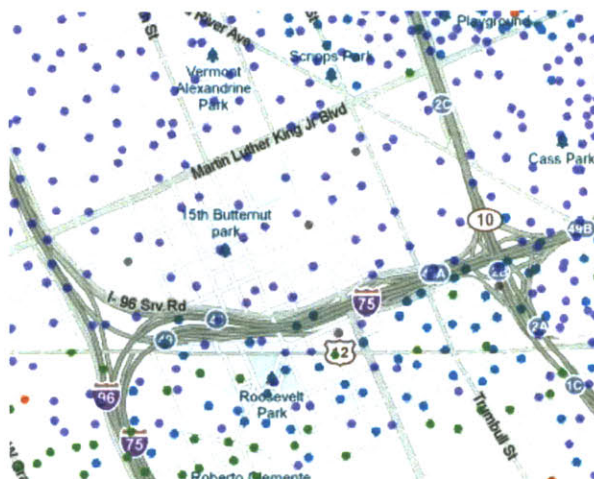
### **Corktown History**

Corktown is Detroit's oldest neighborhood, with some of Detroit's oldest remaining houses and its only Federal Style house



Corktown rowhouses.

Source:workersrowhousemuseum.com



**MAP KEY**

One dot = 25,000 people

- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Other

Racial Make-up of Corktown. Source: Mapping America: Every City, Every Block, New York Times/ 2010 Census Data

(1430 Sixth Street, built in 1830). Like Woodbridge, Corktown began in the eighteenth century as a collection of French ribbon farms. After the French Indian War Corktown became an English community and after the Revolutionary War when Britain surrendered Detroit to the United States it became an American community. Corktown takes its name from the thousands of County Cork immigrants who settled in the west side of Detroit in the mid 1800s. The opening of the Ford Rouge plant in 1903 brought an influx of immigrant and Southern U.S. workers to Corktown. This wave was followed in the 1920s by Maltese and Mexican immigrant communities, as well as blacks from the Southern U.S. There is still a small Maltese population in Corktown today, and the active and stable Mexicantown neighborhood is adjacent to the west (51% white, 28% black, 19% hispanic : U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2009: ) (Gallagher and Hill 2003).

As a neighborhood Corktown developed earlier and quite differently than Woodbridge. Where the first part of Woodbridge's development was one of large houses on large lots, Corktown





Corktown woodframe houses. Source: Dig Downtown Detroit @flicker.com



North Corktown house 2006. Source: projectorange.com

developed early as a collection of small lots with appropriately sized houses. The styles of those houses vary greatly. There are Carpenter Gothic cottages, small brick row houses and Queen Anne Victorians. That feeling of architectural diversity is apparent today. But the size of Corktown is greatly diminished from its size sixty years ago. The houses on its southern edge were demolished throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to make space for warehouses and light industrial buildings. Beginning in the late 1950s urban renewal and freeway related demolitions destroyed over 75% of Corktown's housing stock, and displaced over 75% of its population, which was at that time mostly black. Today the population of Corktown is mostly white, with some hispanic population. The remaining blacks live in the urban renewal housing on Bagley between Rosa Parks and Trumbull, in housing that is architecturally and socially isolated from the rest of the neighborhood.

Both the abandoned Michigan Central Station and the demolished Tigers' stadium are on the edges of Corktown, and both were central to the twentieth century history of the neighborhood. In





Michigan Central Station, Corktown. Source: freep.com



Briggs Stadium (demolished), Corktown. Source: tigerstadiumdetroit.com

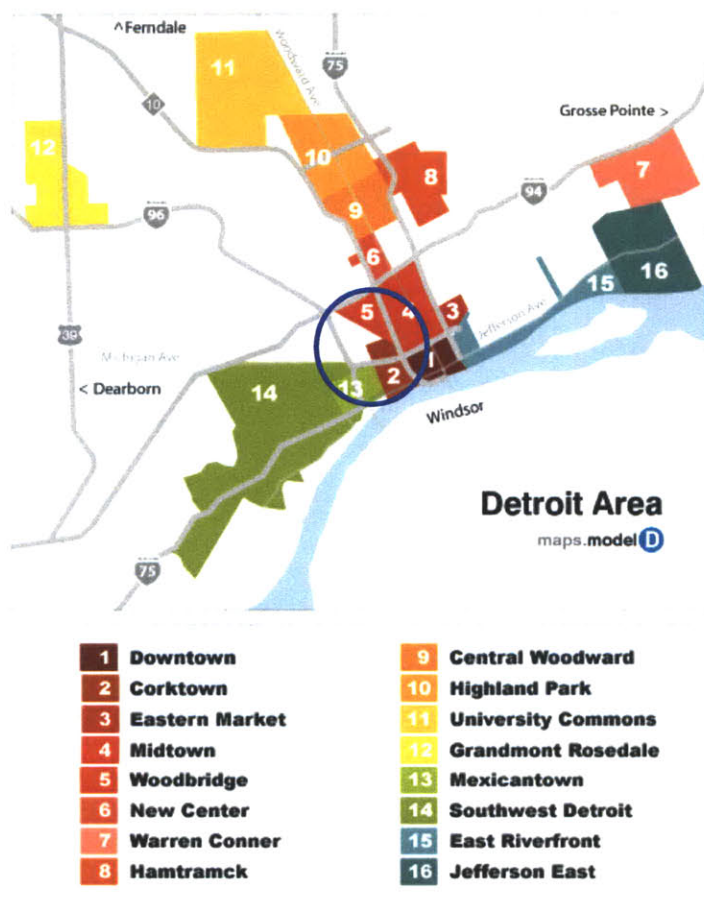
1910 about three hundred wood frame small houses were condemned and demolished on a site of approximately fifty acres to make way for Michigan Central Station, home of the Michigan Central Railroad. Opened in 1914, the structure, built in monumental classical style, consists of a three story high station which sits in front of a eighteen story office building. At the high point of rail travel in during World War One, two hundred trains a day passed through the station and Michigan Avenue was lined with two to four story commercial buildings which provided a shopping district for the Corktown and North Corktown (Briggs) neighborhoods. Corktown residents could walk to Michigan Central Station and catch a train to San Francisco, Chicago, Toronto, or Boston. The station's travelers and office workers augmented the number of customers for those Michigan Avenue businesses. The presence of Briggs Stadium at Trumbull and Michigan Avenue where the Detroit Tigers played baseball from 1912 to 1999 radically raised Michigan Avenue property values. When there was talk of a new Tigers Stadium and parking being built near the old stadium there were 60-70 house fires in 40 days as people took radical measures to prepare for land purchases that

never happened (Taubman College of A + U.P. 2000). The stadium was demolished in 2009 and many of the buildings on Michigan Avenue are gone. There are existing intact buildings alternating with vacant lots.

### **North Corktown History**

The former French farm fields of North Corktown were platted for neighborhood development at a similar time and fashion to those in Corktown. In North Corktown some large Victorian Houses were constructed on Trumbull followed by smaller and simpler houses built to house working class families. As World War Two approached, poor Southern whites and blacks moved to Detroit to take jobs in the automobile and defense industries, renting inexpensive houses or apartments. Over the past sixty years, the combination of job loss from deindustrialization, freeway disruption, and white flight brought about massive vacancy. At one point North Corktown had five zip codes and 25,000 residents. Today it has one zip code and 2,500 residents. It is highly depopulated, with most of its vacant land cleared and owned by the City of Detroit. The sparse population of North Corktown today is mostly black (2% white, 92% black, 6% other: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2005-2009).

Some people see North Corktown and Corktown as two sides of one neighborhood. Others link North Corktown to Woodbridge, because they are adjacent and because there is no freeway dividing them. On this map of Historic Detroit Neighborhoods, they are shown as three separate neighborhoods.



Selected Detroit Neighborhoods. Source: *Model D Media*

## Retail, Transportation and Urban Farming in Corktown

The retail focus of Corktown today is Michigan Avenue. Michigan Avenue in 2011 is far from a booming urban commercial street. But for Detroit it is a positive retail environment, with real estate projects in development. The present owner of the Michigan Central Station, Manuel Maroun, who also owns the Ambassador Bridge, has hired an architectural firm and plans to stabilize the station by replacing its windows and repairing its roof with the goal of making it viable for rental or sale (Oosting 2011). At the same time, there are rumors of a large mixed use, sustainably designed project on the Tigers Stadium site that will have apartments, offices, and a focus on food based retail. There is a completed loft conversion project on Michigan Avenue (Grinnell Lofts) and more projects are planned. Two or three restaurant-bars with a sports theme that are holdovers from the Tigers Stadium days still attract customers. But it is Slows Bar BQ, across Michigan Avenue from the station that has brought Detroiters and visitors once again to Michigan Avenue.





Michigan Avenue. Source: O'Connor Real Estate

Food stores in Corktown consist mostly of small markets, some run by members of Detroit's Maltese community. Corktown residents, especially those with cars, have access to a good full service grocery store, Honey Bee Market (La Colmena), just over the line in Mexicantown. North Corktown has no grocery stores. Its retail life is dominated by the Motor City Casino, hotel, and parking structure. While the casino may be a potential source of jobs and of revenue for the City of Detroit, its scale and form are a further insult to Corktown's people and fabric.

Most of Corktown, like Woodbridge, has a reasonable level of bus service for Detroit. The 27 and 39 buses run on Michigan Avenue east to downtown and west to northwest Detroit. The 29 and 18 buses runs north on Rosa Parks and south on Trumbull. But the term reasonable is relative, as many of the buses run only once an hour, even on weekdays.



Grinnell Lofts. Source: The Detroit News

By the estimate of Jeff DeBruyn, head of the Corktown Residents' Council, there are about thirty household gardens in Corktown proper. Lots are small and vacancy is not extensive



Hope Takes Root, N. Corktown, 2010.

here, so people don't have much gardening space. On the other side of the freeway in North Corktown, there are dozens of household gardens. In addition there are two community gardens, Hope in Bloom, and Spirit Farm (affiliated with the Spirit of Hope Church), and one small (two acre) for-profit farm - Brother Nature Farm. Generally, these farmers own less than 20% of the land they farm. The rest of the land is owned by the city, due to foreclosure or abandonment. Fruits and vegetables are not the only agricultural products grown in North Corktown. Hope in Bloom is in part a tree farm. Just over the border in adjacent Core City, practically on a freeway on-ramp, is another tree farm. Just northwest of North Corktown, also in Core City, is the Catherine Ferguson Academy, a farm-based public high school for unwed mothers. The focus here is on growing and processing food for sale, and on preparing the young women, who bring their babies to school, for a college education and responsible motherhood. CFA was the feature of an inspiring Dutch Film, *Grown in Detroit* is closing in fall 2011 due to a shortage of Detroit Public Schools funds.

The Greening of Detroit and its Garden Resource Network on Michigan Avenue provide a number of services in support of Detroit's urban agriculture community, from youth and adult garden education to tool, seed and compost support. The Greening are also involved in tree planting projects throughout the city, coordinate an urban agriculture database and serve as coordinators of urban agriculture throughout Detroit.

Note: the Greening of Detroit database is not public, in order to protect the privacy and legal status of gardeners working in violation of zoning codes or on land they may not own.

## **Reformers on the Edge**

Jeff DeBruyn and Greg Willerer are both professionals who have given up their traditional careers to live in Corktown and work for social justice. Jeff has the air of someone living an urban monastic life while Greg's world is one of dawn to dusk farm chores and trips around Detroit in an old pick-up truck. While they are both committed to this work and this community, there is also cynicism, irony, and realism expressed in their discussions about the future of Corktown and of Detroit. Philip Cooley is more of an entrepreneur, but his commitment to rebuilding Corktown and Detroit is intense and clear.





Jeff DeBruyn. Source: [facethestation.com](http://facethestation.com)



Imagination Station. Source: [detroitfunk.com](http://detroitfunk.com)



Catie Newell's art installation. Source: [facethestation.com](http://facethestation.com)

Jeff DeBruyn, 41, head of the Corktown Residents' Council, is a lawyer and confirmed urbanist from Western Michigan. Jeff runs a soup kitchen and a women's shelter in North Corktown, sponsored by Saint Peter's Episcopal Church just in the shadow of the Motor City Casino. He knows everything that is happening in Corktown, and is guardedly enthusiastic about its upswing. Since he is committed to bringing about social and environmental justice he is concerned by Corktown's gentrification and the rapid pace and large scale of development projects planned for the neighborhood. He wants to see development in the neighborhood, but wants to be certain that the development projects empower local residents. Jeff gave me a driving tour of the neighborhood on a frigid day in January. Part of the tour was a stop to the Imagination Station, composed of two houses facing Michigan Central Station. Jeff and his partner Jerry Paffendorf are in the process of repurposing Imagination Station's two vacant houses, the only ones left on their street. One house, a victim of arson and now little more than a shell will be a site for rotating interventions/installations by artists and architects. The other house will become a digital literacy center for the residents of



GCDC Houses, N. Corktown. Source: *Model D Media*



Potential agricultural land, Butternut Street, North Corktown, 2010.

Corktown. The most important part of the tour was Jeff's very clear explanation of the three parts of Corktown.

Jeff described the Corktown subset in terms of housing stock and density - or mostly lack of density. Corktown proper is a relatively dense neighborhood whose houses are generally in good shape. North Corktown East - from Trumbull to Rosa Parks, is less dense than Corktown proper and has many gaps in the structure of blocks. He showed me a small housing development consisting of thirty two houses, two or three new houses on a block, to fill in vacancies. The style of the houses, built just before the mortgage crisis, is vernacular but not historicist. There is a plan to continue this infill process as the economy improves. North Corktown West from Rosa Parks to 18th Street is the least dense, most vacant place in the neighborhood. Most of the blocks are quite vacant and even its occupied houses are in bad shape. Most striking here, as in many vacant parts of Detroit is the size of the trees. Many of the hardwoods are over 100 years old, and without the texture of houses, they stand alone in a majestic way.





Greg Willerer and Brother Nature Farm.  
Source: *Time, Inc.*

Greg Willerer, like many of the other Detroiters I interviewed, is a professional who came to Detroit to help rebuild the city. Greg, in his late thirties, grew up in suburban Southfield and taught middle school until he came to Corktown to start Brother Nature Farm, on Rosa Park Blvd. across from an armored vehicle company. Greg's house is worn and his backyard looks like farmyards everywhere, full of various tools and equipment. An industrial salad spinner sits on a stainless steel table to wash the large quantities of greens he sells to local restaurants. He also provides CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) shares to investors together with another urban farmer, sells his organic vegetables at Eastern Markets on Saturdays in the growing season, and gives away vegetables to his mostly elderly neighbors. Greg's organic farm is less than two acres and is intensively planted. Greg uses multiple hoop houses to extend the growing season for his greens. Two dogs guard the house, and there are always interns, high school students, college students, and random adults eager to get their hands in the soil. Greg is working with the Greening of Detroit to acquire more land to expand Brother Nature Farm to the next block in Summer 2011. Greg is in Corktown because he loves to farm but also





Phillip Cooley and Slows' sign. Source: Slows Bar BQ



Bar BQ alfresco at Slows, November 2010.

because he wants to provide food, sustenance, education, and social justice to the people of Detroit.

Phillip Cooley, 33, who developed, built, and runs Slows Bar BQ is a ambitious, successful, young, hip entrepreneur. Slows and Cooley attract committed artists, local residents, business people and suburbanites to Corktown. Slows is an icon of a new Detroit growing again with people committed to life in the city. Cooley is clearly involved in the business economy of Corktown, and now owns two restaurants and several buildings in the neighborhood with his family. But he works at a number of scales and with different urban constituencies, happily sharing his enthusiasm and expertise with other young would-be entrepreneurs. Once a University of Michigan architecture student, he's part of Los Pistoleros, a band of architects, designers, metalworkers who do for-profit and non-profit building projects in Corktown and around Detroit. At the same time he serves as co-chair of Mayor Bing's Detroit Works Citizen's Task Force and on the board of the Greening of Detroit. Cooley buys local produce when he can buy enough to respond the restaurant's high volume. He's committed

to sustainability, and buys sustainably raised Niman Ranch pork and beef, which comes from California and other western states. He is looking forward to the time when there is agriculture practiced at the commercial scale in Detroit, so that locally owned Slows can have more locally sourced produce and meat on its menu.

## **Corktown Conclusion**

Corktown proper, even with its abandoned, iconic train station and its demolished baseball stadium, is one of Detroit's healthiest neighborhoods. It is walking or biking distance from downtown Detroit and is close to Mexicantown and Woodbridge. Corktown has a stock of small older wood frame houses that are being purchased and renovated, mostly by young people eager to live in the city. This new population is mostly white and is described by Detroit's black population as "young white hipsters". Large housing and retail projects are under discussion.

In the past five years North Corktown has seen growth in both for-profit and non-profit urban farming. North Corktown is not like parts of Detroit where block after block has been demolished and cleared, leaving tens of acres of land free. While there is a great deal of vacant land in North Corktown, there are at least one or two houses remaining on each block. North Corktown is an ideal place for small scale farming and has a very rural feel which is beginning to attract people who want to farm and live in the city at the same time.

Today Corktown and North Corktown can be seen as urban and rural parts of one community, divided by the Fisher Freeway and potentially united by commercial uses along Michigan Avenue, by the desire of young people to live in the

Corktown neighborhood, and by the potential of urban farming and food retailing as innovative and potentially reparative uses. The website of non-profit Spaulding Court, a twenty unit apartment complex owned by neighborhood residents, just north of the Fisher Freeway, describes the strength of the Corktown-North Corktown connection:

“Despite the 100 yard wide stream of cars that constantly flows between the two halves of Corktown, the unique character on each side of the freeway keeps residents trekking across the divide, impressed and inspired by the work of their peers” (<http://www.spauldingcourt.com>).



Spaulding Court before renovation, Summer 2010



Site for the link. Source: Google Earth 2010



Spaulding Court in process. Source: Allan Machielse



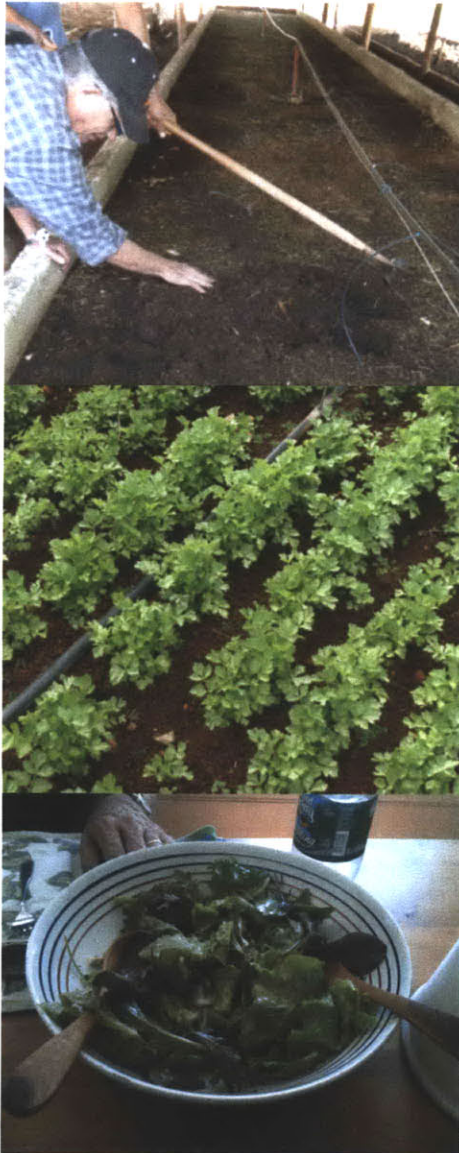
## Chapter Five

### Urban Agriculture Interventions

Urban agriculture is at the forefront of many discussions about the repair of cities focusing on food systems, environmental and social justice, economic development, community building, and urban design. However, I believe these discussions have not gone far enough in considering the integration of urban agriculture in the design of cities. Thus, this thesis investigates to what degree urban agriculture can repair the vacant degraded edges of two Detroit neighborhoods, proposing both design and policy interventions aimed at strengthening the edges of Woodbridge and Corktown.

I describe urban agriculture as “ the growing, processing, and distributing of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities” ( Community Food Service Coalition 2000.[www.foodsecurity.org/](http://www.foodsecurity.org/)). Within this context I see urban agriculture as a continuum, ranging from back yard gardens to large scale for-profit farms and from the preparation of soil to the distribution of fruits and vegetables.

When I began to generate urban agriculture interventions for Woodbridge and Corktown I considered the expression used often today in the sustainable agriculture community: “seed to fork,” amending it to “soil (or shovel) to fork”, to express the importance of soil quality preparation in the process. This division identifies three aspects of urban agriculture: preparation to plant, food production and harvest, and distribution to consumers. All of these phases -- renamed here as *shovel*, *trowel*, and *fork* -- can provide land use and economic development opportunities for both neighborhoods and cities. Some of these interventions are place-based and some have policy implications only.



Havana compost + lettuce production,  
Vermont salad

Some definitions:

**SHOVEL (soil)** Of primary importance in the range of urban agriculture activities are the systems necessary to support urban agriculture production. These include vermiculture, compost production and distribution, raised bed construction, hoop house fabrication, and irrigation system design, production, and installation;

**TROWEL (plants)** Urban agriculture production ranges from growing salad greens in raised beds, to growing watercress and raising tilapia in a closed system in solar heated greenhouses, to raising chickens free-range on pasture, to the development of large fruit and nut tree orchards;

**FORK (food)** Once the harvest is complete, systems of food distribution are key. Especially in a city where a third of the residents do not have access to automobile transportation, getting the food to neighborhood kitchens and tables is essential to closing the shovel to fork loop.

In terms of urban agriculture in neighborhoods, I have identified four conditions. First, there are many varieties of urban agriculture, and not all of them are appropriate for all sites. Except in the most vacant neighborhoods, urban agriculture alone is not the solution for urban fabric repair. Second, because it may have soft edges, urban agriculture sometimes works best in combination with retail, educational and housing uses. Third, like a building intervention, urban agriculture needs to be considered within a context of block, neighborhood and city. Finally, many of these urban agriculture solutions may not be permanent. The reasons for this lack of permanence vary, including economic development, neighborhood planning and zoning, and property ownership.

A range of solutions at various levels from regional planning down to the design of the city block respond to the challenges of urban agriculture in Detroit. These solutions can provide a way to look at Woodbridge, Corktown, and Detroit and its region as part of a larger ecological system.

### **City of Detroit**

I propose several interventions based more in policy changes than in physical changes. They range from the development of zoning instruments that legalize urban agriculture in Detroit to innovative transportation systems that get people to markets and distribute food to directly to Detroit residents.



## **Urban Agriculture Zoning**

At this time there is no category in the City of Detroit zoning code that allows for urban agriculture. It is ironic that a city with over 1,000 farms and gardens has no tools to make them legal. There is an exemption that makes farms and gardens legal for educational institutions. The city has two large and important urban agriculture projects awaiting zoning approval. In addition, many of these smaller already functioning gardens are partially or totally on vacant city-owned land. The zoning process is being held up by the implications of the Right to Farm Act of the State of Michigan, and Mayor Bing's ongoing Detroit Works project.

Kathryn Underwood, the Detroit Planning Commission's chief planner on this issue, explained to me that the Michigan Right to Farm Act (1981) was designed to protect commercial farmers in rural Michigan from encroaching development, sprawl, and nuisance lawsuits. In the state bill no exemptions are made for established urban areas. Once a farm is established, the law prevents municipalities from regulating that farm as long as the farm follows Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices (GAAMPS). The danger for the City of Detroit is that if it passes urban agriculture zoning and sanctions commercial agriculture projects, it will lose municipal control to regulate those farms in the future. At the same time, until the Detroit Works plan is finalized and its policy on urban agriculture is clear, the City cannot and will not approve large scale farm projects. While existing small farms and gardens increase in quantity and new large farm projects wait, these issues are being resolved by City of Detroit lawyers, State of Michigan lawyers, and the Michigan legislature. The legislature is presently considering an amendment of the law to exclude established urban areas (Hodgson et al. 2010, 74) .

### **Detroit Department of Transportation: Market Bus**

The Detroit Department of Transportation could institute the electric bus/delivery van system suggested below in the Woodbridge set of interventions. This would have significant start-up costs. Another idea, which could be done within the city's existing equipment, is a network of east-side and west-side buses that loop to and from neighborhoods to the Eastern Market on Saturday, market day. There are precedents for this kind of system in both Austin, Texas and Hartford, Connecticut. In Hartford, the L-Tower bus route was designed to provide transportation for people from Hartford's North End for medical appointments, jobs, and shopping. Ridership increased from 4,978 passengers in September 2000 to 10,349 passengers in August 2001, with grocery shopping being cited by 33% of passengers as the reason to use the bus. In Austin, Texas Capital Metro along with the Austin Food Policy Council started a "grocery bus line" to serve residents of the low-income East Side. The bus route was designed to run on regular intervals seven days a week to link the neighborhood with two supermarkets (Valliantos, Shaffer, Gottlieb 2002).



Connecticut Transit Bus. Source: Wikipedia Commons

The following are policy suggestions from Woodbridge and Corktown interviewees:

- 1 Many Detroiters want to do small scale urban agriculture projects in their neighborhoods, beyond what they have space for in their front or back yards. In almost every Detroit neighborhood, most vacant lots are owned by the City of Detroit, as the result of property tax non-payment and foreclosure. Purchase of these sites from the city is not easy, and sometimes the prices asked seem extremely high. There is a process for residents to buy vacant lots adjacent to their existing properties at very reasonable rates. Eric Gaabo said that it took him five years to arrange for the purchase of the south facing corner lot on his block where he now gardens in raised beds. Eric and I discussed the development of a fast-track process to allow Detroit residents to purchase vacant land for agricultural use in an expeditious manner.
- 2 When a property is foreclosed in Detroit for non-payment of real estate taxes, it reverts to Wayne County, which auctions off the parcels. If the parcels do not sell they revert to Detroit. For a while Detroit had a land bank which facilitated purchases of vacant land. Reinstitution of the land bank could help expedite the process.
- 3 Valuation of vacant land needs to be reconsidered. Today, according to the tree farmer Olszewski a 30 foot by 130 foot (less than one tenth of an acre) vacant lot in southwest Detroit is for offered for sale by the city for \$ 2,400. Farm land in rural Michigan 100 miles from Detroit is valued at \$ 5,000 an acre. In addition, land used for agriculture could be taxed at a lower rate to make urban farming a more viable occupation.  
Note: The Detroit Works Audit on Urban Agriculture Policy and food security suggests both the parcel revaluation and the tax reduction stated above (AECOM 2010).



- 4 The City of Detroit could supplement the programs below carried out by non-profit agencies like the Detroit Garden Resource Center, now funded by a grant from the USDA Food Security Fund.
  - a. Market support space for urban farmers at Eastern Market. With The Greening of Detroit, Eastern Market plans to have space for farmers to wash, prepare and store vegetables at Eastern Market between market days, as many gardeners do not have such facilities at their garden plots.
  - b. Seminars for farmers and gardeners. The Garden Resource Center provides seminars on both technical and business topics. The business seminars cover marketing, business planning, selection of profitable crops where the technical seminars teach soil science, irrigation, and pest control.
- 5 Michael Olszewski, the tree farmer, recently sent me an article quoted below from *M Live* about the City of Detroit Garden Permit. The City of Detroit has a program to facilitate loans of city owned vacant land to Detroit residents for gardening. Detroit gardeners claim that this plan doesn't work, because it is slow, bureaucratic, and has regulations that are counterintuitive to the needs of gardeners. Gardeners are not allowed to bring soil onto the site, but need that soil to fill raised beds on contaminated or brownfields sites where the existing soil is compromised. They are also frustrated by the top-down process used when developing programs like the Garden Permit.

"The permit doesn't meet the needs of the community because it's something designed inside the department and not designed with the communities' input," said Lee Gaddies, a Detroit resident and gardening advocate. "This goes back to governance, again. We have a broken government structure that designs

processes that don't fit the needs of the community. What we need are departments to partner with the stakeholders in the community, to design processes that function for the community" (Wattrick 2011).

## **Woodbridge Interventions**

My design interventions described here for Woodbridge have as their primary goal the restoration, repopulation, and reinvigoration of the neighborhood edge. Like all Detroit neighborhoods, Woodbridge is in significant need of retail and housing interventions; but my focus here is on agricultural interventions. The edge interventions suggested for Woodbridge vary from half of a block to five or six square blocks, and include a prairie restoration project, a neighborhood-wide community garden, a retail garden center, and a neighborhood farm stand.

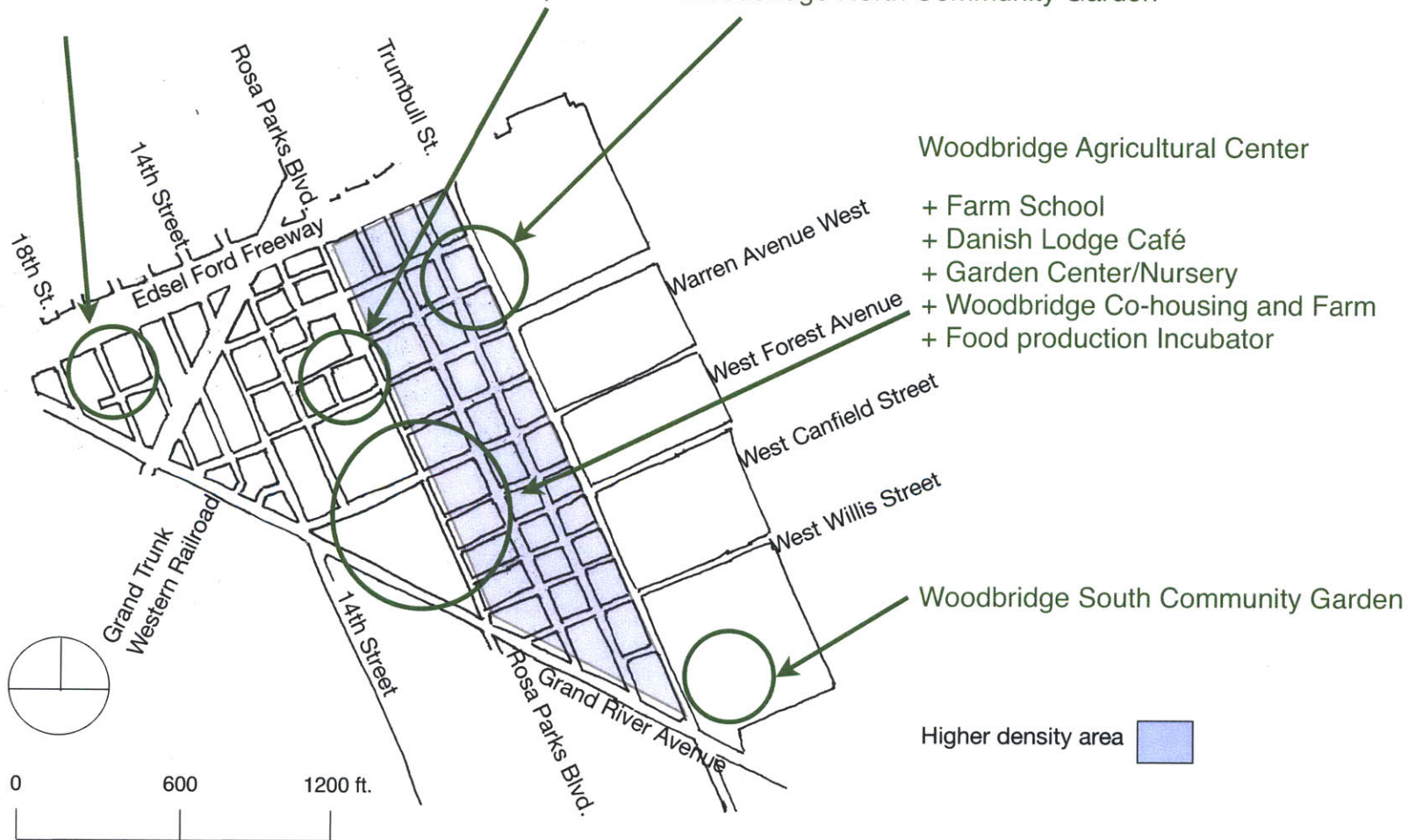
My ideas for design interventions for the non-dense western parts of Woodbridge follow. These are all proposed. None of these uses exist today.

## Woodbridge: **Proposed Interventions**

Electric mini-bus charging station  
Hoop house fabrication

Prairie restoration  
Black walnut plantation

Woodbridge Pub Community Garden  
Woodbridge North Community Garden





## A

**The Woodbridge Agricultural Center** is a grouping of uses at the western edge of Woodbridge near the intersection of Rosa Parks and Grand River. Here, agricultural uses are combined with retail, educational and housing elements on several blocks now owned by the Detroit Public Schools, the City of Detroit and a neighborhood non-profit. Some sites are vacant, some have vacant buildings appropriate for reuse, and some have vacant buildings requiring demolition. The idea is to create a center for agricultural activities that include:

- An after-school and summer agricultural education center for students and adults is in an abandoned one story K-8 school. The school faculty includes Detroit Board of Education teachers, faculty and graduate students from the Michigan State University Department of Sustainable Agriculture, and local farmers. An experiential garden-based curriculum is combined with neighborhood and site history, soil science and agroecology courses. There is adequate room on the site for a schoolyard garden, as well as the much used school basketball court.
- A retail garden center selling compost, vermiculture supplies, seeds, tools, plants, fruit trees. It provides home on-site garden consultations from extension trained garden staff.
- A sixty unit co-housing community with a twelve acre farm in the large interior courtyard and a compost facility/yard/store on Grand River.



The Plant, Urban Farm and Incubator, Chicago,  
[www.plantchicago.com](http://www.plantchicago.com)



Growing Power hoop houses mounded with manure,  
 2011.

- A food production facility incubator for small businesses producing locally made food products in the Danish Lodge ground floor.
- A fresh foods café in the Danish Lodge ground floor retail space.
- A garden book and gift store in Danish Center in the remaining ground floor retail space.
- A farmstand for the sale of Woodbridge-produced food.

## B

The second intervention is a community garden for the Woodbridge Community. This site was designated as part of a neighborhood planning study carried out by Detroit Community Design Center at University of Detroit Mercy in 2003. The location is a vacant lawn which is part of the Boy Scouts of America Headquarters in the northern end of Woodbridge. It is across the street from a group of houses whose owners are active gardeners,



Hoop House Construction. Source: Spirit Farms, North Corktown



Quebec City Ecolobus. Source: Bill Given

who would, with the Boy Scouts' administration, serve as good stewards of the site.

### C

On the the industrial end of Woodbridge, there is a large vacant property adjacent to the Architectural Salvage Center. Centrally located in Detroit and with good access to freeways, this site is a fabrication and installation business for hoop houses.

Detroit's climate requires protection for winter season vegetable and aquaponic production. Appropriate siting with mounding of compost along the walls of the hoop house provides solar gain and insulation adequate to allow four-season growing in Southern Michigan (Coleman 1999). Most urban farms over one acre have at least one hoop house. With Detroit's growing urban agriculture community, this could be a successful small manufacturing/ business to support the agricultural community and at the same time create an economic development opportunity.





Detroit returning to prairie in Northwest Woodbridge.  
Source: Google Streetview, 2010



Forbs, considered by some to be weeds, some to be wildflowers. Source: Federal Highway Administration

## D

On an adjacent site is a recharging facility for small, electric powered bus vehicles used for three purposes:

neighborhood-to-neighborhood transit, neighborhood-to-Eastern Market transit, and fruit and vegetable delivery to neighborhoods. These buses, now being used in downtown Quebec City, are manufactured in Italy, take up to 34 passengers and get approximately 80 miles per charge.

Detroit does have Peaches and Greens, a vegetable delivery service sponsored and administered by a church, but its delivery scope and range is fairly narrow, as its one bus delivers only to two zip codes, 48202 and 48206, northwest of Woodbridge.

## E

In the northwest section of Woodbridge, Bryant Vermont Park is surrounded by four vacant lots which are reverting to prairie. The land has been vacant long enough that the plants and animals of the prairie, (grasses, forbs [herbaceous flowering plants that are not grasses] pheasants, and foxes),



Scripps power plant and carriage house (now demolished). Source: detroitfunk.com

have returned. The park is used for environmental education classes to teach students by exploration and examination of the site what happens when midwestern land is allowed to remain vacant. This project requires little site maintenance but serves as a direct environment learning experience for children and adults to understand how closely linked are the prairie and city ecologies. Since the existing park is no longer maintained, its maintenance fund is used to design and purchase interpretive signage for the new conservation/restoration area.

## F

On Trumbull Street at the southern end of Woodbridge all that is left of the former Scripps Mansion is its brick power plant, flashed in copper and covered with graffiti. The site is advertised as a potential building site. Here, nearly half a block at the entry to Woodbridge is vacant. This could become the site for a weekday farmers market (when Eastern Market is closed) for farmers in Southwest Detroit and beyond. (Perhaps it could avoid Wednesday afternoon when Wayne State's market

is open). It's important to have markets on as many days of the week as possible. This critical mass provides variety and choice for shoppers and gives people the sense that they can go to Woodbridge tomorrow if they miss Wayne State today.



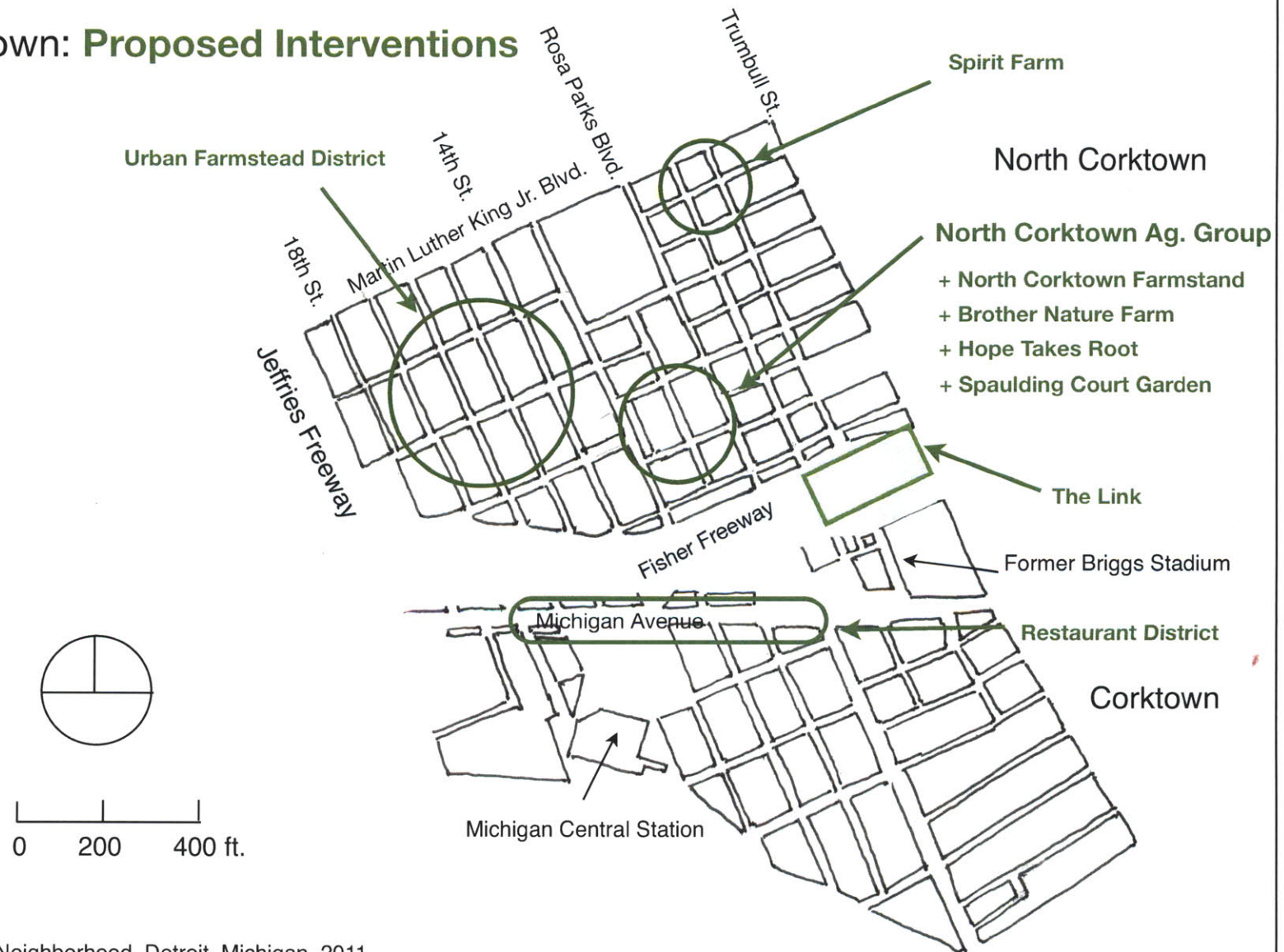
Lone house on Butternut Street, North Corktown, 2010.

### **Corktown Interventions**

The agricultural interventions suggested for Corktown are mostly in North Corktown as Corktown proper has greater density and less vacant space. There are, however, some large vacant buildings and land on Michigan Avenue that would be appropriate for restaurant and retail agriculture uses. North Corktown, with two community gardens and one for-profit garden is very low density, with a great deal of vacant land. This is most



## Corktown: **Proposed Interventions**



Corktown Neighborhood, Detroit, Michigan, 2011.



Northern Michigan Farmhouse. Source: activerain.com



Farmstand. Source: Pete's Greens

true in its vacant sections from Rosa Parks Boulevard to 18th Street, and less true as one moves East toward Trumbull. Interventions in Woodbridge are aimed at creating an edge to contain and strengthen the urban fabric of a viable neighborhood. Here in North Corktown, larger scale agriculture interventions are not only appropriate; they are essential elements of repair.

## A

The urban farmstead model is an approach to the nearly vacant urban landscape described above. My approach is to create each farm as a coherent whole. Rather than clearing the site totally, imagine the block as a small northern Michigan or a Vermont farmstead with an occupied farmhouse, a barn and some out buildings. This is the kind of urban agriculture that most approaches the traditional rural model, and the lack of many close neighbors also makes raising chickens, goats, sheep, and rabbits possible. The farmstead area in North Corktown is indicated on the map. Their proximity of the houses begins to suggest a rural/urban farming village. These farmsteads are on blocks where there are only one or two houses standing. The farmsteads could be run by





2900 Rosa Parks, potential site of North Corktown Farm Market. Source: Google Streetview, 2011



Planting on a freeway ramp in San Francisco. Source: potreroview.net

individuals for profit or be an extension of a Corktown non-profit organization.

## **B**

Each farm will have a farmstand at its front door. In cities as varied as Havana, Cleveland, and Seattle urban farms are allowed and encouraged to have a retail sales stand at the front door of the farm to sell their produce as well as products they create from that produce. This is not only a way to encourage the financial success of the farm, but it is a service to the community.

## **C**

Next to Brother Nature Farm on Rosa Parks, there is a large vacant lot owned by the City of Detroit and used by an armored car service as their parking lot. I propose that a farm market be built here to sell produce primarily grown in Corktown. The local produce could be supplemented out-of-season by commercially available produce and specialty foods. The goal is to give local farmers an outlet and to provide a source for fresh vegetable and



fruit within the neighborhood, so that people can have easy access on foot, by bike, by bus and by automobile.

#### **D**

Tree farms will be located on land adjacent to freeway on and off ramps. There is now a tree farm planted on land owned by the Greater Corktown Development Corporation on a piece of land adjacent to freeway access roads. While this land is zoned for multi-family housing, the tree farm is a more likely use, and one where a range of trees from christmas trees to fruit trees could add agricultural income and aesthetic relief to Corktown.

#### **E**

South of Spaulding Court is a vacant lot which will become a community garden for the twenty unit apartment complex, now owned by the community.

#### **F**

Michigan Avenue's location in Corktown and its proximity to downtown Detroit, to the Wayne State cultural district, to Woodbridge, and to Mexicantown make it the kind of location where a district supporting multiple restaurants, bars and cafés can flourish. In Boston and Cambridge, such districts (like the South End and Central Square) began to develop in advance of other commercial and residential real estate as restaurants looked for inexpensive space for their start-up businesses. Slows Bar BQ has begun the trend here on Michigan Avenue. There is room on Michigan Avenue for free standing restaurants as well as restaurants in existing storefronts. The soil connection here is the

relationship local chefs increasingly have with local farmers. This relationship is another potential example of Corktown and North Corktown connections, where Le Petit Zinc café in Corktown could buy lettuce from Hope Takes Root in North Corktown.

## **G**

The aim of the market link intervention is to provide a series of food stalls creating a west-side covered market with cafés, selling not only food grown in Corktown and Detroit, but fresh fish, meats, and cheeses as well. Foods from Detroit's numerous ethnic communities will be sold here. As important as access to fresh food is the location of the market between Trumbull and Cochrane over the Fisher Freeway, to serve as a physical link between Corktown proper and North Corktown.

## **Thesis Conclusion**

Thirty years ago in "A Place Utopia" in *Good Urban Form*, Kevin Lynch described his vision of a place simultaneously urban and rural:

Imagine an urban countryside, a highly varied but humanized landscape. It is neither urban nor rural in the old sense, since houses, workplaces, and places of assemblies are set among trees, farms, and streams. Within that extensive countryside, there is a network of small intensive urban centers. This countryside is as functionally intricate and interdependent as any contemporary city (Lynch 1981, 294).

I examined Woodbridge, North Corktown and Corktown, each with a different identity. While it is important to make connections between them, it is perhaps more important that they all maintain separate identities. Clearly the proposed urban agricultural interventions in Woodbridge, North Corktown, and Corktown are as different as the neighborhoods themselves. The Woodbridge interventions have more of an educational, retail, manufacturing, and housing nature. The North Corktown interventions are oriented more toward agricultural production in a rural setting. The Corktown interventions are geared toward a community of food shops, cafe, bars, and restaurants. While Woodbridge, North Corktown, and Corktown are improved by these interventions, urban agriculture alone is not adequate to heal the deep problems of Detroit's depopulation and abandonment.

Today, for-profit urban farms are often suggested as drivers of economic development in post industrial cities. But the economic and environmental realities of these farms as profit-making entities provide challenges both for farmers and for their neighborhoods.

At the small scale, below four acres, for-profit farmers find it difficult earn as much as \$ 20,000 per year. In Detroit, as in Vermont or upstate New York, small farmers often have a spouse working as a lawyer, a nurse, or a teacher to provide both regular income and insurance benefits (Interview with Tyler Matteson, analyst with Farm Credit East).

At this small scale non-profit level entrepreneurial farms **can** survive, because of extensive volunteer labor, operational support from their governing boards, and foundation support. These farms not only provide produce but they enrich



their communities, providing job training, economic development, and connections between neighbors and neighborhoods.

For farmers hoping to work at a greater scale, Detroit has large swaths of vacant land within its city limits. However, many of these parcels are the sites of former automobile and other heavy manufacturing plants and are categorized as brownfields. Remediation, while possible, is extremely expensive. There is a small amount of funding available from the EPA to test and remediate brownfield sites to be used for urban agriculture. Several such remediation projects are now in process, from small scale garden projects to larger scale urban farms in New Orleans and Toledo (Cosier 2011, 53).

In this process of creating farms on the edges of urban neighborhoods, it is extremely important to avoid the issues of forced demolition and relocation that took place in the 1960s and 1970s under urban renewal. To move people and clear land to create ideal conditions for urban agriculture would undo the benefits of fostering economic development and of growing fresh food in the city.

While this thesis examines the state of urban agriculture in Woodbridge and Corktown and makes proposals for both policy and place-based urban agriculture interventions, further work needs to be done, involving neighborhood stakeholders in the development of design interventions and providing further development of the zoning code that Detroit needs to support and regulate urban agriculture uses in the city.

Given the acknowledgement of the need for further investigation of the role of urban agriculture in Woodbridge and Corktown, there is value in beginning to create a new future for these neighborhoods, especially North Corktown. Here we are not striving for greater density, but we are accepting North Corktown's new semi-rural nature. In some post-industrial cities like Detroit, the city is becoming less dense and more rural than the suburbs. Looking at the levels of higher and lower density, of occupation and abandonment in all three neighborhoods of a Detroit simultaneously shrinking and slowly growing, I see the pattern of "interwoven growth and shrinkage" that Brent Ryan describes as "patchwork urbanism". I also begin to see Detroit in terms of Kevin Lynch's concepts of the "dispersed sheet" and the "polycentered net". From Woodbridge to North Corktown and over the freeway to Corktown there are levels of higher and lower density, alternating peaks and valleys of neighborhood abandonment and of neighborhood rebuilding (Ryan 2010, 7) (Lynch 1961, 82-97).

As stated in the agricultural challenges described above, urban agriculture will be only one part of a complex and nuanced rebuilding of Detroit. Regrowth in Detroit is heavily dependent on primarily local economics and politics. When it occurs this regrowth will most likely take place over several decades, and will be more organic and less perfect than city planners or elected officials might propose. Detroit could become a decentralized web of urban villages, in some part connected by irregular bands of farms and parks, and enriched by agricultural activity as a source of local food, a source of jobs and a builder of community.

## Thesis Interviews

Interview Subject	Affiliation	Date
Dan Pitera	Director, Detroit Community Design Center U of D/Mercy	July 12, 2010
Dr. Robin Boyle	Wayne State University Department of Urban Planning	July 13, 2010
Greg Willerer	Brother Nature Farm	July 13, 2010
Jim Geary*	Woodbridge Pub	July 13, 2010
Eric Gaabo	Woodbridge resident	November 8, 2010
Dr. Asenath Andrews *	Principal Catherine Ferguson Academy	January 7, 2011
John Gallagher	Detroit Free Press	January 10, 2011
Lisa Richter	Earthworks Urban Farm Capuchin Soup Kitchen	January 11, 2011
Jeff DeBruyn	Corktown resident Imagination Station	January 11, 2011
Malik Yakini	Detroit Black Community Food Security Network	January 12, 2011



Jess Daniel	MSU Phd. Student + Pop-up restaurateur	January 12, 2011
Dan Carmody	Director, Eastern Market	January 13, 2011
Dr. Michael Hamm	C.S.Mott Professor of Sustainable Agriculture Michigan State University	January 14, 2011
Ed Potas	Woodbridge resident	March 23, 2011
Kathryn Lynch Underwood	City Planner Detroit Planning Commission	March 24, 2011
Phillip Cooley*	Slows Bar BQ	April 28, 2011
Michael Olszewski*	Woodbridge Tree Farmer House builder	May 2, 2011
Tyler Matteson*	Farm Credit Analyst	May 16, 2011

\* phone interviews

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